

REVOLUTIONS IN MARRIAGE IN THE FICTION OF HENRY JAMES

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THE FICTION OF HENRY JAMES

ASHLEY MASON
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This thesis is an assessment of the representation of romantic and sexual love in the fiction of Henry James. The social conventions of love, namely courtship, marriage, and adultery, are examined in context of the morality and philosophies of the eras and places James lived in, as well as by comparison of his works in contrast with other major novelists who were published during the same time period. The thesis is concentrated around four of Henry James's major novels: *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*. A number of James's lesser novels, as well as other major works of note both before and following James's career are mentioned in relation to his work and the influence these novels and novelists have had on each other.

I, Ashley Mason, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 35,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date..29.11.04..

Signature of Candidate.....

I was admitted as a research student in September 2002 and as a candidate for the degree of M.Phil in September 2002. Permission for the revision of the thesis was granted in January 2004; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between September 2002 and June 2004.

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CONTENTS

Title Page.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Declarations Concerning University Regulations.....	iii
Contents.....	iv
A Note On Editions Used.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Chapter I: Henry James, Women, and Marriage in the Victorian World.....	1
Chapter II: <i>The Portrait of a Lady</i> and the Objectification of the Spirit.....	19
Chapter III: Greed and Tragedy in <i>The Ambassadors</i>	34
Chapter IV: Love as Commodity in <i>The Wings of the Dove</i>	48
Chapter V: The Achievement of Equality in <i>The Golden Bowl</i>	62
Chapter VI: The Influence of Henry James.....	72
Bibliography.....	83

A Note On Editions Used

I have, when they were available in the University Library, used copies of the revised New York Edition of Henry James's works, published between 1909 and 1911. Any quotation of *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* refer to this edition. The text of *The Ambassadors* referenced in this thesis, however, is of the first edition published in 1903; any other novels named refer to their original publication.

Where an edition of a text has not been available, as in the case of *Rose Blanche*, and *Violet* by G. H. Lewes, I have relied upon the text quoted by another critic, or on resources such as the Critical Assessments collections edited by Graham Clarke.

Ashley Mason

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I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have advised and assisted me in my research: W. F. Herbert; the secretarial staff of the St. Andrews University English Department; the staff of the St. Andrews University Library; Hazel Hutchison of Aberdeen University and Dr. Sara Lodge of St. Andrews University for their advice on revision; and most particularly Philip Mallet and Jill Gamble for their patience.

Ashley Mason

CHAPTER I
HENRY JAMES, WOMEN, AND MARRIAGE
IN THE VICTORIAN WORLD

Henry James's women are not often raised as an example in any discussion of early feminist literature. His own gender made him a spectator of a struggle he was not brought up to take any particular notice of, and his female characters do not often deal in the details of suffrage or social feminism. They tend rather to be classified under 'high art' in an analysis of his work, that objectification so often being a critical part of the personal crises of one or more protagonists. The personalities of James's major characters are perceived as having been assimilated into aesthetic preferences, into taste. Will is an extension of artistic sensibility, rather than sensibility being an extension of will. This viewpoint has produced many interesting and entirely valid observations on James's work, but at the same time such a frame of reference excludes certain ideas that are integral to James's fiction. Separating the ideas and actions of the characters from their dependence on artistic theory highlights the presence of psychological and political ideas that had a huge impact on James and the society he lived in.

Neither James nor his work is feminist in the usual sense: he is not agitating for voting rights or similar issues of the material world. What he is concerned with is the acknowledgement of the necessity of the feminine influence in emotional and intellectual culture as well as in the daily interaction of the social world. He sought to show that underneath the human propensity for grief and tragedy, underneath his belief in aesthetics, there was an essential communication between the masculine and feminine emotions, and to dismiss that communication inevitably damaged the individual. This communication manifests in James's fiction in several forms, from the social to the metaphysical: courtship and marriage enshrine nearly all of them.

Therefore, the marital relationships James created, the prospective and failed ones as well as the consummated ones, represent a distinct though subtle world view complementary to the more radical views of committed feminists such as Virginia Woolf.

In the history of literature evaluating the nature and rights of women, James occupies an unusual position: his gender deprived him of any first hand experience of being a daughter or a sister or a wife. He was not restrained by either poverty or bigotry, and the pursuits of the creative intellect so often denied to women were provided unstintingly to James and his brothers. His sister Alice, on the other hand, seems to have been the embodiment of the repressed female intellect: James, on some level, seems to have been aware of the nature of her troubles. A number of the most influential contributors to Victorian fiction were such women, desperately searching for an outlet for an intellect not readily recognised by men, even those who loved them. Neither did James occupy the uncommon but notable position of men such as John Stuart Mill, who agitated in a very public and vocal fashion for law to be altered in favour of women's rights. James was the second son of a predominantly male family who never married, was never involved in any sustained sexual or romantic relationship with a woman, and never engaged in public political activity. Therefore his female characters, which have so much in common with creations such as Eliot's Dorothea Brooke and Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway, are all the more surprising.

The conditions that created such a voice are complex. At his death James was a British subject, and had spent most of his life in Europe, yet his family history and his father's social circle grounded him firmly in the world of the intellectual 'American Renaissance.' Cultural identity was a consuming interest for James: it is a frequent topic in his letters as well as a recurrent theme in his published work. His personal

history, friendships and experiences exposed him to a variety of literary influences, which fuelled the expression of his questioning nature in his fiction. The art of fiction was, during his youth, as prominent a part of the intellectual life as essays and philosophy had always been. James's lifetime saw a blending of various artistic disciplines across national borders that produced scientific theory, literature, and visual culture in startling new forms: he, his brother William, and several of their own and their father's friends were all contributors to this renaissance. James's career coincided with the closing decades of the Victorian era, a time when, as Malcolm Bradbury observes, '...the novel had become a central means of exploration...the feel of the culture, the relationship between personal and historical life' (Bradbury 9). Even if James had wished to avoid the question of woman's presence in society (*The Bostonians* proves unequivocally that he did not), it would have been nearly impossible to do so.

Technical advances meant that literacy and learning were more readily available to a broader spectrum of the public. Although the education of the working classes was still generally a matter of when time might be spared from the labours that generated the sustenance of a family, printed media became a more affordable commodity during this period and basic literacy evolved from an exceptional to an expected feature of life among all classes.¹ This change in the demographics of the reading public led to a greater general awareness of political issues, including the arts and feminism in society. Even the utter absence of women within a story could be construed as a statement on the part of the writer if an audience chose to react to it.

The social and practical details of everyday life also had an effect on the imagination of a boy who was well travelled even as a child. The nineteenth century,

¹ For a fuller discussion of literacy in Victorian Britain, see David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture*. (London: John Murray, 1997).

particularly the Victorian era in Britain, saw more social change than any remembered century in the nation's history. The upheavals of the industrial revolution, the changing political world, and the nation's awareness of itself as an empire rather than simply a powerful country could hardly go unrecognised by any of its residents, let alone its intellectuals. The rights of man and of humanity have provoked theory for centuries, as well as inspiring the world's most enduring works of philosophy and drama. Gradually the questioning of man's place in a divinely created world and the nature of sin was supplanted by questioning of man's place in a society of peers and how independent morality and virtue were of the mandate of holy law. The nature of power, of religion, of class, and of the social rules that were observed almost without thought by the public, gained more public attention than such issues had previously known.

The accession of Victoria to the throne created a phenomenon similar to what her predecessor Elizabeth Tudor had worked very hard to achieve: she herself became the keystone of national identity. The image of Victoria as diminutive queen in command of a nation of tall, strong men correlated to the small geographical space of Britain being the governing body of a disproportionate amount of the world. The greatest difference between these two women as monarchs is how they imposed their will on a society that was not accustomed to taking suggestions, let alone orders, from women. Elizabeth Tudor, in becoming a woman ruling a world of men, strained to maintain her emphatic display of possessing 'the heart and mind of a man'. Victoria's inheritance was more secure: she took as much pride in her femininity as she did in her monarchy, and even more pride in being the wife of Albert of Saxe-Coburg. She exercised political power without abdicating her sexuality or her place in her family, and with increasing regularity women all over the Western world were proving that intellect was a matter of choice and education rather than gender. The patterns of the Victorian

family and the position of the woman in society were questioned and challenged even as the movement to systematically enforce these roles gathered momentum.

The Victorians made their lifetimes an era of social and political reform in all aspects of life. Advances in medicine and technology brought to light the habits and pitfalls in the lifestyles of every class, not simply those that could afford (what was considered) a healthy standard of living. When the tortuous, sometimes murderous practices of such institutions as the coal mining and chimney-sweeping industries were recorded, measures were (eventually) taken to counteract them and other such abusive features of the labour system in Britain. Medical discoveries and the embryonic discipline of psychology sought to define internal, systemic differences between the genders, beyond the obvious fact of the reproductive system. As women began to prove with greater frequency that they could achieve the same intellectual feats as men, a concerted effort was made to keep them in the spheres of life they had always occupied in modern society. Thus, for all these varied reasons, marriage as a social convention and the role of the woman in the union came to occupy a prominent place in the public imagination and debate.²

² Nancy Armstrong provides an eloquent explanation of this phenomenon: "The Victorian novel certainly drew on arguments about the relationship between female nature and the characteristics called femininity that social scientists were attributing specifically to women of the Western European middle classes, but the novel did something with the relationship between female nature and feminine culture that only such a popular medium could do. Victorian fiction revised an earlier narrative that insisted a woman's quest for financial security and social responsibility began and ended with her ability to attract an agreeable man and extract a promise of marriage from him. According to this narrative, in which a woman's desires determined her place in the intricate ranking system of the social world her femaleness and femininity were one and the same. In Victorian fiction, however, such closure becomes increasingly impossible over the course of the century. A woman did not necessarily desire the man who could both gratify her desire and provide her with a secure social position. Industrial novels such as *Mary Barton* and *Hard Times* indicate that the wrong object choice on the part of a woman could shake masculine authority over both household and nation to its foundation.... During the 1850's and 1860s, in other words, fiction made the selection of a husband the most important thing a woman did. On her choice of a love object, a man she could both marry and desire, depended not only her identity as a white, respectable English woman, but also the integrity of the family unit, on which in turn rested the well-being and longevity of the nation. To regulate the female body thus became imaginatively bound up with the internal order and external authority of Great

The sexual union between man and woman is one of the most basic and necessary relationships in humanity, regardless of whatever rituals various societies have couched it in. The place of marriage in modern Western society has never been regarded as negligible, but in the Victorian era it emerged from the records of family letters and public (though not necessarily well publicised) law that the convention was tantamount to an industry, one that took up considerable time in the lives of a rising population under the age of twenty-five.³ As sartorial fashion began to cover more and more of the female body, the guidelines of social morality developed to a suffocating degree of restriction. Poets, philosophers and public thinkers such as Coventry Patmore in his wildly popular poem *The Angel in the House* (1854) and John Ruskin in the two lectures published as *Sesame and Lilies* (1864) enunciated what would be seen by posterity as traditionally British and Victorian ideals of femininity, marriage and motherhood.

In opposition to this desire to continue and increase the indoctrination of the female population, John Stuart Mill and others took up the issues that Wollstonecraft and Godwin had publicised at the end of the previous century. Mill in particular sought to draw attention to and reform the abuses women had endured for generations in the name of filial and marital submission.⁴ Conceptions of the female body, mind, and intellect were moving towards the as yet distant reality of social equality. As the issue became more central in the functions of society, so it began to receive more critical attention in the fiction of the period.

Britain itself." Nancy Armstrong, 'Gender and the Victorian Novel,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 97 – 124 (pp. 112-13).

³ Armstrong pp. 97 - 124 (p. 97).

⁴ J. S. Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* was published in 1869.

Sexual ethics, courtship, and marriage are eternal themes in literature, present in classical mythology and biblical stories as well as modern European fiction. The nineteenth century in Britain saw the appearance of characters frankly acknowledging the mercenary nature of the institution with fewer and fewer attempts at disguising it with a façade of religious or moral virtue. Choice was crucial not simply because of a man's integrity or generosity, but because of the financial viability of the pairing that the woman was entering into. However kind and loveable the prospective husband might be, he was not a good choice unless he could maintain his income as well as his good nature:

Well before the publication of Darwin's theory of natural selection in relation to sex, however, the Victorian novel had radically altered earlier notions of bourgeois love based on natural sympathy and class affinity. The Brontës were not alone in reimagining these same principles as the means of ensuring that only those capable of governing their desires could assume a position among the respectable classes. Like the Brontës, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and virtually every other Victorian author we revere today demonstrate that on an individual's ability to subordinate female desire to feminine taste and morality, whether in one's lover, wife, daughter, or oneself, depended the quality and perpetuity of domestic life. On these in turn depended the quality and perpetuity of the nation. Indeed, we might say that Darwin, in revising his theory of evolution to include the factor of natural selection in relation to sex, was performing the same sleight of hand that novels had been performing for several decades. He provided the natural historical rationale for relocating the cause of economic exploitation and social inequity in individuals' lack of self-government and the poor quality of family life that inevitably resulted (David 102).

It was becoming steadily more difficult to deny that a woman's mind was just as perceptive and capable of complex thought as a man's, even if the 'progressive' thinker still felt that she ought to occupy a separate social sphere. It became likewise apparent that relationships, the actual emotional and intellectual interaction between lovers, had infrequently (if ever) been the subject of literature. Fiction as a literary form developed as authors sought to show a fuller picture of motive, cause and effect in

the web of human interaction. Prominent writers, well before the publication of Darwin's theories, began to explore the hollowness of this convention that was at the same time considered to be one of the supreme manifestations of emotion. Jonathan Swift, Lawrence Sterne, William Hazlitt, Percy Shelley and other major contributors to the Romantic era of literature have left evidence, in both published writing and private letters, that the idea of romantic, emotional love was a very real thing. Even Pope, in his occasionally virulent anger over the shortcomings of the female sex, indicates that there were real individual failings to be angry about, rather than just an illusion of a sympathy between the sexes. Their literary heirs in the next century would begin to question the factors that caused this curious lack.

The travails of lovers and the struggle towards marriage as a theme are well represented in canonical literature. Lines like Shakespeare's 'the course of true love never did run smooth' have so entered into the culture that the quotation is more recognisable than the play it came from. Fielding, Austen, Bronte, and particularly Dickens created characters that so have so entered the public imagination that later generations know the names of these characters without necessarily being aware of their origins. If the nature of the emotion between these lovers is ever questioned, it is in terms of a more or less religious morality, when and if one or another of the characters is (or is thought to be) guilty of a crime against a basic moral code, typically one of the ten commandments. Relationships such as Pamela to her Mr. B (*Pamela*, 1740-1) and Tom Jones to his Sophia (*Tom Jones*, 1792) were less the subject of Richardson's and Fielding's novels than the rewards received by Pamela and Tom for being exactly the sort of person their respective authors felt a woman and a man should be.

Jane Austen made courtship and its conventions the centrepiece of all her work: but even her alliances are, at heart, traditional stories of the young woman rewarded for virtue. Virtue, in her world, claims more respect for woman's individuality than Pamela's piety or Sophia's loyalty did. Although Austen does not make any demands for rigorous education, intellect and patience are definitely qualities to be desired in a partner and maintained in oneself. However, if not every woman can be as adroit as Elizabeth Bennet or as altruistic and forbearing as Elinor Dashwood, it is more than sufficient to be innately good: Jane Bennet, Marianne Dashwood, Fanny Price, and Catherine Morland all achieve this goal and make marriages as comfortable as those of their more assertive peers. The great difference between Austen and Thackeray is that Austen's morality is never antagonistic to a comfortable income. The love and domestic equanimity that is always the ultimate prize for Austen's young women is in most cases insuperable from wealth.

Emily and Charlotte Brontë subjected their heroines to the very real challenges of poverty as well as gruelling test of personal and emotional strength. Austen's young women find themselves forced to question the integrity of those they care for: the heroines of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853), must judge not only others but their own motives. They do not often know from the outset exactly who will satisfy their needs. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe in particular are helped to an improved knowledge of themselves by the unusually unprotected solitude they experience during episodes in their respective stories.

Austen explored the world of large families, fashionable drawing rooms, and a well informed social circle: when Mr. Wickham makes off with Lydia Bennet, the event will be known by every gentleman and his family in the south of England if not the whole country. The populations of Brontë novels, by contrast, inhabit districts of a

considerable distance from this genteel society. This is something of a disadvantage, as it enables such misadventures as Heathcliff's abduction and incarceration of Catherine Linton. However, the same isolation also frees Lucy Snowe, an English teacher in a French school, from the necessity of imposing the expectations of those around her on her own understanding of her heart. Of course both circumstances reflect personal experience, as Austen and the Brontës grew up in the sort of societies their heroines live in. These backdrops are used by the authors to augment or compensate for just how independent they felt a woman's choice could be. The social isolation of the Brontë novels is a landmark between Austen's world and the articulated introspection of George Eliot's characters that would later have such an impact on Henry James.

Mrs. Gaskell's heroines are also seen to choose mates for love which does not depend upon the assurance of financial prosperity, but again these choices are not as courageous as they seem. Mary Barton saves her virtue by doing so, and is seen in the end to enjoy a secure (and, moreover, a prosperous) home as a Canadian settler. Margaret in *North and South* (1854) holds off from admitting to her passion for Mr. Thornton until she finds herself in an independently wealthy position. Her last novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1864), introduces a situation similar (though far less intense) to Lydgate's disastrous union with Rosamond Vincy in Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871). The alliance of Doctor Gibson and Hyacinth is a matter of the attraction of appearances concealing a severe clash of personality: but the marriage is a late second one for both partners as opposed to being a waste of the sympathetic character's entire life. Also, the Doctor, never having had any expectation of a wife who truly understands him (although he seems to appreciate and love this quality in his daughter) is inconvenienced by the discovery of Hyacinth's limitations rather than truly distraught by them, as Lydgate finds himself. Molly Gibson's marriage to Roger is as close as

Mrs. Gaskell comes to the emotional union of intellectual companions that would come to be the ultimate goal of so many fictional lovers. Certain of Trollope's later heroines, particularly Hetta Carbury in *The Way We Live Now* (1874), achieve a degree of this independence: but Hetta's choice of Paul is something she has to struggle for against her own desire not to disappoint her mercenary mother. Her own doubts pertain to the question of Paul's good nature: it is only when she is certain of his honour and fidelity that she has the strength of will to choose him over the expectations of her family. She disappoints her mother's aspirations and her cousin's affections, but they cannot dismiss her from their lives: she means too much to them, and the success of her relationship with Paul is illustrative of the growing acknowledgment of women's independent will. A foreshadowing of Gaskell's and Trollope's meditations came from the pen of George Henry Lewes:

Love, in its commonest form, I take to be an enthusiasm with which the mind intensifies and dignifies its desires. Unhappily, in most cases, it is only a passing enthusiasm, dying away with the gratification of its desires; and dying because not founded on lasting qualities; dying because the sympathies are not involved, because the moral requirements are not responded to with the same facility as the physical. A love whose root is in passion and only passion, cannot be supposed to survive the first ardour of that passion. It is only when above and beyond that passion, giving it force and perpetually renewing it as from a central fire, there exists what I should call a moral passion—an intense moral desire—that the love can be durable. The sensuous desire is violent but limited, the moral desire is infinite; the craving which soul feels for perfect communion with the soul, and the infinite variety with which that desire is maintained, give to love its lustre and its immortality.

G.H. Lewes, *Rose, Blanche, and Violet* (1848)⁵

⁵ This passage is taken from the anthology *Victorian England in its Novels, 1840-1870*, ed. by Myron Brightfield, 4 vols (Los Angeles: University of California Library, 1966). II, p. 3.

The growing awareness of female emotional and intellectual validity led to a tendency in the novels of the day to distinguish between the desire for financial security and the desire for emotional comfort. The above passage was written by a man whose career was known even in his own lifetime for his biographical and philosophical works rather than his fiction, and indeed the passage reads more like social commentary than a novel. Then, as now, he was also more recognised for his involvement with George Eliot. She shared Lewes's interest in philosophy and social analysis, but her sublimation of that interest into her fiction was so successful that it made her works some of the finest in the language. The couple acted upon the idea represented in the passage from Lewes's work: their attraction for each other was perceived to be intellectual and emotional in nature rather than physical; they could not marry by law or by church, and yet they cohabited and were not known to have been unfaithful to one another for more than two decades. Lewes's ideas must be recognised as being more progressive than the common public would permit, but even in the light of his relationship with George Eliot, he was not as rebellious or iconoclastic as radicals came. James was deeply impressed by Eliot's work, and for a brief period during his youth he was sufficiently acquainted with her to pay a number of social calls. Few other writers would have such an impact on James's own fiction as Eliot's.

George Eliot's work explored the disappointments inevitably created by the confusion of the social and moral strictures on marriage and the innate need for a spiritual, intellectual partner. Each of her major works encompasses a variety of philosophical and social questions, but a common theme throughout much of her work is the exploration of what constitutes a happy sexual and marital relationship.

Middlemarch (1871) needs no introduction: the novel is a microcosm of the society she grew up in. Through the relationships of two central couples and the provincial society

they inhabit, Eliot probes the ways in which the marital union could damage the spirit as deeply as it was ostensibly meant to gratify it. In the first, Tertius Lydgate, a young doctor with a chance at true eminence in his growing profession, courts and marries Rosamond Vincy, one of the town's prettiest middle-class girls. Lydgate is captivated by her beauty and charm, without consideration of the motives that bred those qualities. Rosamond's determination to keep a certain style of household and live a certain quality of life is such that the personal qualities of a prospective husband are the least important of his attributes. The "root of their love" is in a passion that consists entirely of the lusting after appearances, and it barely manages to survive the first week untainted. The marriage breaks down as Lydgate comes to realise the only value his wife perceives in his identity lies in the status his reputation and income brings her as a social figure.

The second central figure of the novel, Dorothea Brooke, is the kind of woman who would have made Lydgate a more suitable wife. Dorothea goes against all the wishes of her family and neighbourhood in marrying an ageing but respected scholar, Edward Casaubon. As an attractive and independently wealthy young woman, she has what Rosamond Vincy would have given just about anything for. Where Rosamond is an utterly sensual and social being, Dorothea's ideal world is one that operates on idyllic socialist principles and where she has no corporeal presence at all, so that no attention is paid to her congenital beauty. She refuses the eligible match she is expected to make, exchanging what she feels is empty sensual enjoyment for a life of intellectual industry with a man she believes will encourage and direct the expansion of her interests and desires. She takes a gamble with her emotions and finds herself bankrupted, married to a man who wishes her to be much what Rosamond Vincy is, an

attractive young woman who maintains an elegant appearance and ignorance of his scholarship. The marriage is as disastrous as Lydgate's.

Dorothea is granted a second chance: Casaubon unexpectedly dies, and she in the end is free to give up his estate, the magnitude of which has become a burden to her. After resolving a misunderstanding over the nature of the relationship between Casaubon's vital young cousin Will Ladislaw and the same Rosamond Vincy, now Mrs. Lydgate, Dorothea and Ladislaw marry. She trades the wealth she was born to for a lifetime of emotional and sexual fulfilment with a man who has at least a better appreciation, if not a perfect one, of her mind.

The works of George Eliot had an impact on every major novelist in English that followed her for several decades, whether that impact was manifested through open homage, reactionary ideas, or indirect influence. Both personally and through her work, she came to have a great influence on Henry James. He spoke of her with hero worship, while at the same time he was never prepared to accept her fictions with the same deference they inspired in so much of her audience. Certain aspects of Rosamond from *Middlemarch* are refined and put through different permutations of circumstance in Eliot's final work, *Daniel Deronda* (1876). This novel would be the subject of one of Henry James's most famous pieces of critical work: 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation' (1876) finds various flaws in the plot and the theories presented in the novel. Nonetheless the work had a profound effect upon him and was a significant influence on *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), which established his own place in the literary canon. The troubles of Rosamond Vincy, Dorothea Brooke, and Gwendolen Harleth were revised by James into the experience of Isabel Archer.

While national identity in Britain was experiencing rapid change and subtle manipulation, in America it was reaching a crisis point. Industry and technology were

changing American as well as British society, and when human rights came into conflict with such a conveniently exploitable work force as slave labour, the Southern states rebelled. The plantation economy and its attendant philosophies conflicted with Northern ideals long before, but the exigencies of the American Revolution overshadowed these differences. When they were finally challenged, they attempted to fight their way free of the Union rather than give up their way of life. The Civil War in America was one of the most traumatic events in the nation's brief history, and Henry James and his brothers came of age in the course of those difficult years.

James was brought up in the consciousness of his father's association with such American notables as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his own lifelong friendships with Thomas Sergeant Perry and William Dean Howells.⁶ The questions of American identity and American literature were important ones to this circle.⁷ Henry's older brother William studied medicine, psychology, and art; Perry had his own literary inclinations; William Dean Howells would become one of James's most enthusiastic publishers and one of America's foremost men of letters. Henry James senior was a philosopher of contemporary notoriety if not enduring acclaim. James's grandfather had built a fortune and so much of the civic fabric in the growing New York that the city of Jamestown in that state was named for him.⁸ He, and other men like him, believed in the Puritan ideals of industry and self-sufficiency before all else.

During Henry James's youth, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville were examples of the men who were making contributions toward the evolution of an American literature: beyond this, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Emerson

⁶ Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Untried Years, 1843 – 1870*. (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953). See also Edel, *Henry James: The Conquest of London 1870 – 1883*. (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1962). For letters from James to Perry and Howells, see Henry James, *Letters*. ed. by Leon Edel. (London: Macmillan. 1974 – 80).

⁷ James Kaplan, *Henry James: A Life*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), p. 81.

⁸ Edel, *The Untried Years*.

were all espousing and preaching the ideals of an American identity. When the young Henry read the New England fiction of his youth, he found encouraging attempts that he did not feel were actually successful to these ends. He discovered for himself the eloquent descriptions of the land America lived upon and the structures of its communities, but the fiction of the time lacked probing into what made one intrinsically American. He saw the old questions of human isolation examined and questioned in a new accent, not a new cultural framework: the setting was different but the issues were the same as what had come before. His solution to this lack was to contrast the American character with its roots in decadent, decaying Europe.

One of the things for which George Eliot's genius is so celebrated was her ability to illustrate so many details of English life across the social spectrum, and how the classes related to one another. Henry James was a similarly dedicated watcher, if of a narrower slice of society. He made his subject the manners and habits of wealthy European (and particularly British) society. Personal experience exposed him to various aspects of European culture without ever involving him too deeply in its workings, so that he remained always the meticulous observer reflected in his fiction. He grew up watching his own parents, considering his mother's role in the family of such an eccentric philosopher as his father made himself into. James's mother's place in and significance to his family was the subject of commentary during her life as well as repetitious questioning by her grandchildren. The development of his literary ambition is characterised by a preoccupation with several novelists who frequently examined the role of the woman in society and in the public manifestations of sexual relationships: courtship, marriage, and adultery. In addition to George Eliot, he was influenced by the work of Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy, all of whom created portraits of women which have fuelled generations of debate.

As a young man his regard for these novelists progressed into acquaintances and friendships with some of them, unhindered by the social disapproval they sometimes attracted. In addition to his visits to the home that George Eliot shared with G. H. Lewes, he was a friend of Ivan Turgenev, which exposed him to the thought of the Russian novelists of the time. He was well read in French, keeping up with works of Flaubert, Zola, and their contemporaries who were delving into many aspects of human experience James chose to avoid. In later life he became a frequent companion of Edith Wharton, aiding and abetting her affair with a charismatic man named Morton Fullerton, a personality that would strongly influence James in his writing of the character of Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove*.⁹ He was never indoctrinated with or adopted nineteenth-century orthodox views of money and the institution of marriage: thus the major characters in his fiction have a liberation shared by few that came before them.

Jane Austen's world was that of the upper middle class where it crossed paths with the fringes of aristocracy: Mr. Darcy may have a French name and own a lovely estate, but he is still a Mr., not a baronet or an Earl or a Duke. Henry James, liberated by the changes of time and nationality upon the social world, made his characters European princes as well as doctors and businessmen and financially insecure young women. The world of the wealthy and opulent upper classes was the milieu that Henry James devoted his creative energy to examining and dissecting.

Money remains as necessary in James's fiction as it was in Jane Austen's, although he attaches to it a far more complicated morality than Austen did. James is careful to never allow any of his characters to achieve happiness, contentment, or even peace of mind without also possessing moral and emotional virtue. Those characters

⁹ Kaplan pp.510-13.

that cannot or will not separate wealth from personality are the characters most distasteful to James's moral values. When James's Morris Townsend in *Washington Square* (1880) perceives Catherine Sloper's inheritance as an element of her character, any respect for her intelligence is nullified: the two perceptions cannot both be sincerely felt in James's world. Morris Townsend allows his greed to overcome the charm he had heretofore displayed to his prey, and is one of the memorably unpleasant men of James's fiction. The deceitful nature of Townsend recurs in several of James's later novels, a constant antagonism to the feminine ingenuity and sincerity that James prized so much in his characters and in society. His works demonstrate the necessity he feels femininity is to the world, something he felt was at risk of annihilation at the end of the Victorian era.

Chapter II
THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY AND THE
OBJECTIFICATION OF THE SPIRIT

The Portrait of a Lady, published first in 1881 and revised in 1908, is arguably James's most popular novel: it brought to the public the character of Isabel Archer, an "intelligent but presumptuous girl" (James 1975, 8) who has proved to be one of his favourite creations. Isabel is James's literary monument to his cousin Mary (Minny) Temple, the only woman it seems he ever considered romantically. Her early death from tuberculosis caused the young Henry considerable emotional distress.¹⁰ James was on an extended tour of Italy, and corresponding frequently with his cousin (they both hoped her health might improve sufficiently for her to join him in his travels) when he received news of her death. Whether due to his imagination or his subconscious, a number of his characters would bear some resemblance to her. Most of them possess the restless energy James ascribes to his cousin, and his fiction is peppered with young women dying of tuberculosis, visits to Italy, and the initials M. T.. In many ways the character of Isabel is James's wish-fulfilment for the life his cousin might have lived: when she is introduced, she is a woman of much the same age and vivacity as his cousin was. The development of her story is the journey toward maturity that Minny Temple was deprived of, the lack of which James understandably felt left his cousin unfinished.¹¹

Isabel Archer's story begins where Minny Temple's ceased, but it takes her through trials that one feels James or any reasonable man could not have desired for a woman he cared deeply for, romantically or otherwise. She is not a simple memorial, she is an exploration of idealism and free will, of a measure of independence that women were at the time not often believed or permitted to possess. Isabel's fate, the

¹⁰ Virginia Llewellyn Smith, *Henry James and the Real Thing*. (Basingstoke: Macmillan. 1994), p. 34.

product of her own misjudgements, carries her well beyond the realm of personal memory and makes her a unique character. She declares many times throughout the novel her distaste for the bitterness of experience: in spite of this, she finds herself experiencing difficulties she never imagined, securely woven into one man's web of appearances before she even begins to understand how she got herself there.

It was a habit of Victorian writers to use the smoking of cigarettes as a hallmark of a villainous nature in a character, or at the very least a potential for moral backsliding.¹¹ James had his own metaphorical device for denoting positive moral quality, which Isabel demonstrates: a Jamesian character's willingness and ability to speak what he or she is thinking and feeling, regardless of whatever social conventions he or she may, even consciously, be flouting. Their attitudes may be unconventional, even antagonistic, to those around them, but they are no more afraid of receiving advice—the unapologetic cannot be chastised or corrected—than they are afraid of being thought gauche, or even shameless. Isabel is characterised immediately by her unaffected candour in response to her aunt's dissatisfaction with her behaviour:

Ralph meanwhile handed Isabel her candlestick. He had been watching her; it had seemed to him her temper was involved—an accident that might be interesting. But if he had expected anything of a flare he was disappointed, for the girl simply laughed a little, nodded good-night and withdrew accompanied by her aunt. For himself he was annoyed at his mother, though he thought she was right. Above-stairs the two ladies separated at Mrs. Touchett's door. Isabel had said nothing on her way up.

'Of course you're vexed at my interfering with you,' said Mrs. Touchett.

Isabel considered. 'I'm not vexed, but I'm surprised—and a good deal mystified. Wasn't it proper I should remain in the drawing-room?'

'Not in the least. Young girls here—in decent houses—don't sit alone with gentlemen late at night.'

¹¹ Edel, *The Conquest of London*, p. 425.

¹² Richard Altick, "The Favourite Vice of the Nineteenth Century," Chapter 8 in *The Presence of the Present: Topic of the Day in the Victorian Novel*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), pp. 240-74.

'You were very right to tell me then,' said Isabel. 'I don't understand it, but I'm very glad to know it.'

'I shall always tell you,' her aunt answered, 'whenever I see you taking what seems to me too much liberty.'

'Pray do; but I don't say I shall always think your remonstrance just.'

'Very likely not. You're too fond of your own ways.'

'Yes. I think I'm very fond of them. But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do.'

'So as to do them?'

'So as to choose,' said Isabel. (67)

These days it is hardly unusual, let alone inappropriate, for a young woman to sit up or stay out with any number of young men unchaperoned. James's original audience felt differently: such behaviour was noticed and frowned upon. Mrs. Touchett's comment about 'too much liberty' conceals her concern for the risk her niece takes with her marriage eligibility in polite society. Reputation is still paramount, even to Mrs. Touchett, quite an independent woman herself: knowledge of how Isabel's actions were perceived by her peers and James's audience is crucial to an understanding of his intentions and the insights provided by this passage. To say the passage has shock value is an exaggeration: girls could do such things, and quite often did, but young women of Isabel's class and upbringing—a section of society that comprised a good deal of Henry James's audience¹³—could not have done so without the censure that Isabel risks. Isabel is prepared to do something that will cast doubt on her chastity, something which during her time was still considered necessary in an unmarried woman. Attitudes were changing, but it would be the generation after James, those who would come of age during the First World War, that would truly give more social trust and physical freedom to their young women. Like Daisy Miller, Isabel in this episode displays a streak of what William Dean Howells referred to as a distinctly American

¹³ Barbara Leckie, "A National Habit of Repression: Henry James's Negotiation of Adultery in *The Golden Bowl*," Chapter 4 in *Culture and Adultery: the Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857–1914*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 164–5. See also Henry James, "The

'reckless innocence,' a quality that James was fascinated by in his young women characters. With both characters James takes the risk of alienating the readers he wishes to influence. William Dean Howells wrote that Daisy Miller was

the innocently adventuring, unconsciously periculant American maiden,...Never was any civilisation offered a more precious tribute than that which a great artist paid ours in Daisy Miller....But the American woman would have none of [her]....because she was too jealous of her own perfection to allow that innocence might also be reckless.¹⁴

Howells's discussion is of Daisy Miller, but Alfred Kazin demonstrates in his discussion that the comments are as applicable to Isabel. The audacity of such actions belongs not only to the characters but to their author. William Thackeray's truly shameless Becky Sharp engaged in such behaviour and cared very little what anyone else thought of her, so long as the intimacy resulted in the desired effect. Thackeray would also have expected his readers to think as badly of Becky Sharp as Amelia comes to. George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver does a similar thing; indeed takes it to an extreme not unlike Isabel's idea of 'perfect happiness', but her indecision and remorse eventually kill her. For Isabel, however, this concern for appearances is, at least as yet, so foreign to her nature that she dismisses it with no emotion at all, neither petulance or guilt. Her compliance arises out of a good will towards her aunt: this particular social nicety means so little to her that her observance of the rule is of no greater personal significance to her than if she broke it. Allowing that the incident doesn't carry all the connotations for Isabel that it does for her forebears, it is of note because it does not cast Isabel in a negative light, either for the reader or for the other characters involved. Her

Art of Fiction" reprinted in *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism* ed. by Roger Gard. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), pp. 186 – 206.

¹⁴ William Dean Howells as quoted by Alfred Kazin in *An American Procession*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 226.

attitude illustrates adaptability, and a certain naivety, but she doesn't demonstrate any meanness or bad temper. Lord Warburton is, at most, titillated, and finds her all the more compelling; Mrs. Touchett is perhaps exasperated by the realisation that she will have to watch Isabel's carelessness, but this does not appear to damage her opinion of her niece. To Ralph, nearly as circumspect as his mother, his cousin's naivety, combined with what he already knows of her taste and understanding, only serves to make her more valuable to him.

James's morally negative characters do not rely on material signals such as smoking; instead, they are glib and manipulative, feigning indifference or ignorance as it suits them. His sympathetic men and women are imbued with an innocence of the detailed rules of society, sometimes to the point of catastrophic naivety, particularly when those rules impinge upon actions they wish to see as 'fine'. They are always learning what is expected of them, both by society and individuals, but they retain at all costs the ability and the courage to choose. James bridges the gap between Austen and Brontë by making the mental and emotional independence of a Jane Eyre or even the abhorrent brutality of a Heathcliff valid and operational in any milieu, be it a poverty-stricken garret or a ball room. Despite the misfortunes Isabel encounters because of her determination, she never loses her courage or fails to take responsibility for her own mistakes. Henrietta Stackpole shares her friend's honesty, but when charged with any fault she denies it, and is hurt by the comment. Isabel takes her criticisms calmly, separating her transgressions from what, to her, are the excessive sensibilities of her detractors.

Isabel Archer is the titular and the most sympathetically delineated character in the novel. Her character and her fate are evolutions of Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth from George Eliot's fiction. These two women cannot be

considered without the two men by whom their lives are shaped (Edward Casaubon and Will Ladislaw, Henleigh Grandcourt and Daniel Deronda): Isabel's relationships must also necessarily be examined along with her character. She is of course closely related in several ways to Ralph Touchett, and the originality of his character is often overlooked in the intensive examination of Isabel's place in James's fiction. Ralph is as uncommon a man, not to mention a Victorian hero, as Isabel is a lady.

The first descriptive comment James makes of Ralph as his character is introduced is that he is "a person of quite a different pattern" (19), and this is as true of his personality as it is of his clothes and his figure. He looks "clever and ill" (*ibid.*), with which comment James immediately separates Ralph from the vitality and action of Isabel's life, although he will come to be emotionally inextricable from it. Ralph is, like his vivacious cousin, somewhat separated from the societies—British, European, and American—to which his life and the circumstances of his parentage have given him a claim. His knowledge of them is consummate to a degree that will long elude Isabel, but he does not involve himself in everything he observes. This distance is sometimes a choice and sometimes a disability. When Isabel first appears, her grace and energy make her attractive to all three men on the scene: but it is Ralph, by keeping his relationship to Isabel free of sexual overtones, who gains a more thorough emotional understanding of and intimacy with her than is granted to anyone else with whom Isabel comes into contact. He is the positive moral centre of the book, not for his appearances—he is first seen smoking a cigarette, and James makes him otherwise physically distasteful—but for his evaluation of those around him, in which he displays an acuity that even his mother lacks.

Ralph's physiological opposition to Isabel in combination with his emotional attachment to her brings the two characters to such a communion that they fulfil the

obligations of psychological "twinning" discussed by Philip Sicker (Sicker 123). He is, in fact, her destiny, although in ways that typical Victorian fiction could not have imagined. Their 'twinness' is a sort of symbiosis: they do not mirror one another's actions, but divide the richness of life between them, so that, when apart, each lacks certain necessary elements. Ralph's mental and emotional qualities transferred to Isabel would have made her so complete a person there would have been no story to tell. Between them, Isabel, from the moment of her appearance, has all the vitality and capacity for life; he moves with a painful shuffle, she all but glides and bounces. Ralph travels, slowly and to carefully chosen destinations; Isabel moves quickly and wherever she thinks will hold interesting sights. Ralph perceives, and hopes in some way she will make use of his perceptions for him, although she fails on the key point of heeding his distaste for Osmond. He offers Isabel the moral judgements she is not yet capable of achieving herself, until the crisis of his death opens a similar faculty in her.

Ralph's actions provide Isabel with the money that makes her Osmond's target. Although it is only the reader who knows the whole truth of her story as it happens, she affronts Ralph's wishes for her (inadvertently) as much as she determines not to be the woman the world around her expects her to be. Ralph is well reconciled to his own mortality before he meets Isabel, and is very careful never to indulge his wish of being her lover. The only way he can demonstrate his passion for her is by first persuading his father to divide what money was intended for his son and leave half to Isabel—the first step in making Isabel his 'second self'—thus providing for her financial security much as a husband would have, but without confining her to the role of wife. Ralph, like Isabel, is thoroughly unimpressed by the norms of the marriage market: the narrator implies that, for Ralph, far from being necessary behaviour, women in pursuit of mates embrace a 'vulgar art':

'You're not serious,' Miss Stackpole remarked; 'that's what's the matter with you.' But for all this, in a day or two, she again permitted him to fix her attention and on the later occasion assigned a different cause to her mysterious perversity. 'I know what's the matter with you, Mr. Touchett,' she said. 'You think you're too good to get married.'

'I thought so till I knew you, Miss Stackpole,' Ralph answered; 'and then suddenly I changed my mind.'

'Oh pshaw!' Henrietta groaned.

'Then it seemed to me,' said Ralph, 'that I was not good enough.'

'It would improve you. Besides, it's your duty.'

'Ah,' cried the young man, 'one has so many duties! Is that a duty too?'

'Of course it is—did you never know that before? It's everyone's duty to get married.'

Ralph meditated a moment; he was disappointed. There was something in Miss Stackpole that he had begun to like; it seemed to him that if she was not a charming woman she was at least a very good 'sort'. She was wanting in distinction, but, as Isabel had said, she was brave; she went into cages, she flourished lashes, like a spangled lion-tamer. He had not supposed her to be capable of vulgar arts, but these last words struck him as a false note. When a marriageable young woman urges matrimony on an unencumbered young man the most obvious explanation of her conduct is not the altruistic impulse. (85-6)

It is an uncommon Victorian hero indeed who can look at a young woman and find her appealing for her bravery and a certain metaphorical resemblance to a lion tamer, and then be put off by her insistence of marriage—not in the spiritual, emotional sense but in the prosaic, social one—as the supreme destination of any life, man's or woman's. The demographic impossibility of every woman eventually making any marriage at all, let alone one considered socially suitable, didn't stop influential voices of the Victorian intellectual establishment from propounding marriage as a condition that every woman should strive to achieve. The manifestation of Ralph's love lies not in a desire to possess Isabel or restrict anyone else's access to her charms, but in a wish to see her absolutely free, unfettered by economic dependence as she is by her (recklessly innocent, Jamesian American) nature, unconstrained by concerns of class and

superficial propriety. Because of Isabel's eventual squandering of her fortune on Osmond, Ralph will later be tormented by guilt that his action dictated her fate. This is the single injustice Ralph commits against Isabel, taking the responsibility for her judgement onto himself: Isabel's ruin is Isabel's fault, and her acceptance of that is part of what makes her so remarkable a woman even today. Nonetheless, Ralph's generosity stands as a unique example of selfless love in the tradition of Victorian fiction.

At the opposite end of the moral spectrum in the novel stands Gilbert Osmond. His character is the least altered from those that inspired James in *Daniel Deronda*: both men deal with an older, cast-off mistress and a young, beautiful wife. Both men also take a deeply repellent pleasure in playing their wives and lovers off one another, although Serena Merle is considerably more aware of how she is used than Lydia Glasher is. The fundamental difference between the two men is that, in Eliot's version, Grandcourt's malice is a viciousness born of lifelong indulgence. His upbringing has taught him that anyone not born into his own social circle is inherently expendable, to be used rather than understood. Osmond, on the other hand, must rely on appearances rather than palpable wealth, and appreciates in a more subtle way how generosity may be taken advantage of and manipulated. His history is itself evidence that his concept of the human spirit as an object to be collected or disposed of is something he consciously learned.

Barbara Hardy describes Isabel as a victim of 'her own vagueness of emotion as well as to the 'natural' if not reasonable emotions of others, such as envy, greed, and possessiveness' (Hardy 191). Vagueness is certainly a challenge if not a stumbling block in analysing James's style, but it is an unjust assessment of Isabel's character to extend that to include her emotions, given that, knowledge of oneself and society is a lesson learned by characters throughout literature, not simply James's fiction. The

reader is left in no doubt that she is not in love with either Caspar Goodwood or Lord Warburton:

She wished [Goodwood] no ounce less of his manhood, but she sometimes thought he would be rather nicer if he looked, for instance, a little differently. His jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff; these things suggested a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life. Then she viewed with reserve a habit he had of dressing always in the same manner....She reminded herself that this was a frivolous objection to a person of his importance; and then she had amended the rebuke by saying that it would be a frivolous objection only if she were in love with him. She was not in love with him and therefore might criticise his small defects as well as his great—which latter consisted in the collective reproach of his being too serious, or, rather, not of his being so, since one could never be, but of his seeming so.... Caspar Goodwood had never corresponded to her idea of a delightful person, and she supposed that this was why he left her so harshly critical. When, however, Lord Warburton, who not only did correspond with it, but gave an extension to the term, appealed to her approval, she found herself still unsatisfied. It was certainly strange. (106-7)

This assessment of her emotional and physical responses to Goodwood and Warburton is articulated before Isabel feels any real discomfort: she finds herself unsatisfied, not trapped. She acknowledges the anomaly of her inability to feel the expected affection for Lord Warburton, but it is a narrow reading of her character to say her misjudgement in marrying Osmond is compounded by her constant attempts to evade her sexuality in response to an attraction she doesn't actually feel. She knows very well how she feels for Ralph, although he takes definite steps to limit that love until he knows he is well beyond her reach, and again that emotion is disparate from the physical. When she sits up with him at his deathbed, she cries out "O my brother!" (479), not 'O my love!'. Isabel's downfall is not vagueness, but the same susceptibility to manipulation at the hands of people she respects and cares for. That emotional vulnerability occurs on a daily basis in any affectionate relationship: there are dozens of varieties of such affection and innumerable, usually insignificant instances when it

could be taken advantage of. Isabel's downfall is the combination of that weakness with her an enduring confusion between the aesthetically beautiful and the moral, sensible, reality. Because she initially lacks Ralph's ability to perceive degrees of moral and emotional depth in the people she comes to know (most fatally in the case of Serena Merle, perhaps even more than in Gilbert Osmond), her idealism and occasional credulity are turned into susceptibilities instead of the strengths that they are in Ralph. She and Ralph share an idea of life that goes deeper than the conventions society upheld by James's audience. Ralph finds her interesting and attractive because of what she thinks, because of the demonstrations of her temper, because of how little afraid she is to be something other than the ideally demure young woman. On Isabel's part, her tragic stupidity is committed out of a genuine desire to do something she thinks the world around her believes she is not genuinely selfless enough to do: to marry a man she thinks to be devoted to ideals, to individuality, to understanding inner beauty as well as culture. Isabel's reckless innocence is an expensive variety of contrariness: it is partly because she is told by several sources that Osmond is worthless that she is determined to discover a 'fineness' that isn't there.

There is in Isabel a glimmer of the desire to be seen making her grand gesture. Dorothea Brooke, Rosamond Vincy, and Gwendolen Harleth all anticipate her in this desire to be seen, although Dorothea's reasons are a little less self-involved than those of the other two, at least consciously. Ralph, on the other hand, hides his actions so well that it is years before Isabel knows the truth. When she does learn of it, she must be enlightened by the woman who used her naivety against her. Isabel becomes the very victim she and Ralph were so determined she should not be: a young woman who enters into a marriage based on the economic and social advantages she brings to the union,

and turned into the centrepiece in a life full of objectified relationships and circumstances.

Isabel gave a long murmur, like a creature in pain; it was as if he were pressing something that hurt her. 'The world's very small,' she said at random, to hear herself say something; but it was not what she meant. The world, in truth, had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters. She had wanted help, and here was help; it had come in a rushing torrent. I know not whether she believed everything he said; but she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next thing to her dying. This belief, for a moment, was a kind of rapture, in which she felt herself sink and sink. In the movement she seemed to beat with her feet, in order to catch herself, to feel something to rest on....

She clasped her hands; her eyes were streaming with tears. 'As you love me, as you pity me, leave me alone!' He glared at her a moment through the dusk, and the next instant she felt his arms about her and his lips on her own lips. His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and underwater following a train of images before they sink. But when darkness returned she was free. She never looked about her; she only darted from the spot. There were lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn. In an extraordinarily short time—for the distance was considerable—she had moved across the darkness (for she saw nothing) and reached the door. Here only she paused. She looked all about her; she listened a little; then she put her hand on the latch. She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path (489-90).

Any novel deserving of critical analysis fuels a good deal of that attention with the thematic significance of its endings. Henry James's conclusions to his novels are famous, even infamous, for their surprising brevity and (unsurprising) ambiguity. The conclusion of *The Portrait of a Lady* is memorable for being one of James's few visually delineated episodes, as well as for the physical contact between Isabel and Goodwood, an even rarer occurrence in James's fictions. Isabel's rejection of Caspar Goodwood and all that he promises has always posed a difficulty to popular sympathy with the story. It is difficult to accept that a heroine meant to have understood her great

mistake should, at the end of her story, return to accept the consequences of that mistake when she has been offered a way out of the situation that few, if any, readers would have thought the less of her for taking. She is often understood to be sexually frigid; she has a metaphysical desire to be the author of her own character, not the subject of another's reading;¹⁵ and she has an obligation to Pansy Osmond, and her own idea of parenthood.¹⁶ There is also something to be said about James's habitual distaste for physical impulses: but these conclusions miss a certain defining element of Isabel's character. James meant her to be a tragic figure, and a tragic figure in the truest sense of the term is one who understands and accepts that she is still responsible for the faulty judgement that has led her to her punishment, despite whatever circumstances or other forces that have manipulated that judgement.

The key to Isabel's last choice lies not in her capacity for melodramatic self-aggrandisement, or any distaste for sex on her part: rather, it is her understanding of Ralph's love for her, and hers for him that gives her the strength and the reason to return to the fate she has brought on herself. She does not affront her own destiny, she affronts the destiny prescribed to and expected of the women of her time. There is, as James puts it at the end of the novel, 'a very straight path' for Isabel, albeit an arduous and painful one: it is the only way out of the "mill of the conventional" (478) that Ralph so hates to see Isabel crushed in. In going back to her unsavoury husband, she refuses to make a sacrifice of herself, a martyr to Ralph's memory. Paradoxically, she negates her great mistake of marrying Osmond by going back to him to live on her own terms, to prove that she is not defined or saved or justified by her position as the sexual object

¹⁵ The concept of the 'writing of the self' is a thesis presented and demonstrated at length, through several examples of James's work, by Millicent Bell in her *Meaning In Henry James*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). The idea is also discussed by Stephen Donadio in *Nietzsche, James, and the Artistic Will*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁶ Laurence Bedwell Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp.52-3.

of a man. All at once she demonstrates the irrationality of love referred to by Laurence Lerner,¹⁷ the psychological symbiosis that occurs so frequently in James's fictions, and that her ultimate destiny is invested in herself, in her memories and her choices, not in her function in an overwhelmingly masculine world.

Isabel's choice must also be understood in terms of the influence that dramatic tragedy, both classical and contemporary, had on his work. We are accustomed to think of tragedy as marked by some manifestation of physical violence, frequently in the form of suicide, but at the very least of a physical mutilation that will leave a noticeable scar.¹⁸ Oedipus, the quintessential tragic hero, blinded himself with Jocasta's brooch pins; Hamlet and Lear both die ostentatious deaths, as do Goethe's Werther, and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. Victor Hugo's Jean Valjean dies at the end of *Les Misérables*. These are all stories James would have been familiar with. But the concerns of tragedy, melodrama, and aesthetics shared James's interest with those of the life of the upper middle class: the thoughts, actions, and histories that characterised the world he knew, and solutions of such a dire nature are hardly common occurrences in the annals of Europe's fashionable circles. In this world, suicide is not committed in public. A goal that James set for himself, and so beautifully achieved in his final works, was the creation of tragedy that is emotionally harrowing without being physically violent or shocking. No screaming, no pools of blood, no visible weapons, hardly any tears and most certainly no unseemly dishabille on the part of his characters:

¹⁷ "Several explanations are possible of why love needs to be irrational. It may represent the power of sex, the impossibility of totally containing so violent a drive. It may represent the necessary basis of any defiance of social norms: the strength to withstand parental power and prudential pressures can only come from believing that you are part of something vaster than yourself. Or it may represent an implicit condemnation, an awareness that unconstrained freedom is disastrous, that choosing a life partner without guidance is too mad for reason. Love can be glorified for its irrationality, or the taint of irrationality could be a propaganda weapon by society's institutions" Laurence Lerner, *Love and Marriage: Literature in its Social Context*. (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), p. 180.

James demonstrated tragedy that might take place with quiet delicacy in the drawing rooms of polite society without losing any of its impact.

James uses traditionally shocking conclusions as a situational 'fixative solution' on the portraits of his tragic heroes in *Roderick Hudson* and *The Princess Casamassima*. With the story of Isabel Archer, he moves the locus of tragic definition into the realm of the mental and emotional, rather than as finalised by physical fact. Isabel is repelled by Goodwood's sexuality and she feels a certain responsibility towards Pansy Osmond, but more than this she must in some way observe and do penance for the mistakes she has made. The most appropriate response to her crime is to accept the imprisonment she so freely ran into: living her penance rather than succumbing to hysteria or death makes her a revolutionary woman compared to her forbears.

CHAPTER III

GREED AND TRAGEDY IN *THE AMBASSADORS*

Progressing directly from *The Portrait of a Lady* to the publication of *The Ambassadors* in 1903 skips over two decades of James's writings and considerable growth in his style. He produced a bulk of work during this time, including *The Bostonians* (1886), *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), *The Tragic Muse* (1889), *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896), *The Awkward Age* (1899), and *The Sacred Fount* (1900). He also maintained a continuous output of short stories at the same time: the popular and influential supernatural tale *The Turn of the Screw* first saw print in 1898. His publications during this period represent forays into the major socio-political debates of his day, and fictional experimentation with the philosophical and metaphysical ideas of his brother William James and their father, Henry James senior. The younger Henry James also used his fiction to enshrine his ideas about aesthetics and the sophistication of his narrative style. These two decades also saw James's ambitions concerning (and crushing failure in) the field of stage drama. His attempts were notoriously unsuccessful: his letters of the time document considerable personal distress, and this experience may have contributed to James's hostility towards Oscar Wilde.¹⁸ Nonetheless, he gave up play writing with great reluctance, and his experiments with dramatic style would inform much of his later work in fiction.

Henry James's best loved protagonists are young women: Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, and Maggie Verver are easily the most frequently dropped names among discussions of his work. Their individual stories represent what was, at least in the view of James and his colleagues such as William Dean Howells, an archetype of the

¹⁸ Kaplan p. 369.

American girl and her experience in Europe. Alwyn Berland points out that an important part of this archetype is how far their gender distanced their experience from commerce: "their sensibilities have neither been brought into conflict with, nor subverted by, the 'world of grab' " (Berland 191). After a series of such memorable heroines, James's shift back to a masculine protagonist sharpens his focus as well as offering a different perspective on certain themes present in his previous works.

All of James's later major works in some way recall one or several of his earlier efforts: in *The Ambassadors* (1903) Lambert Strether is reminiscent of both Christopher Newman of *The American* and Rowland Mallet of *Roderick Hudson*. The two evils at the heart of all of James's work are the objectification of the human spirit, or soul, and the 'failure to live'. These failings threaten any character within James's universe, but there are differences with respect to gender as to exactly how they pose that threat.

In the eras James lived through, women, at least the women with whom he was socially familiar, were not responsible for their own financial livelihoods. Visions of the poor and destitute were the stuff of his childhood nightmares. He recounts in his autobiographical writings a crying fit brought on by his eavesdropping on the reading of a particularly frightening Dickens story; in another episode, he describes a vivid memory of seeing London's poor through the window of a carriage.¹⁹ If a middle class woman, in the light of the grace and beauty James felt she ought to embrace and embody, took it upon herself to establish even the most tenuous direct association with the world of paid labour, she laid herself open to constant criticism. The responsibility and necessity of earning a living, in which failure could ostensibly lead to such horrors, made her more than a little peculiar to the public eye. James felt very strongly about

¹⁹ Edel, *The Untried Years*, p. 100, p. 131.

his own mother's position as the anchor of emotional security within the family, and his sentiments in this respect were in perfect accord with popular opinion.

Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of a Lady* carries this expectation through to his fiction: she is a sympathetic character, both an element of comic relief and a sceptical counterpoint to Isabel's idealistic nature. Despite Henrietta's liveliness, James never allows for any conclusion that her choices are as appropriate as Isabel's. She remains a bossy, somewhat invasive personality despite her charm. His female protagonists, those who face spiritual crises in the stories they inhabit, may be in one of three styles. They are brought up to understand the human spirit as something that cannot be turned into a commodity, and become the victims of those who do (Isabel Archer, Milly Theale); they are brought up to think of everything in life as a commodity but learn that this is a sin against the human spirit (Maggie Verver); or, they understand the difference and willingly choose to objectify whomever is necessary to their desires (Serena Merle, Kate Croy). The freedom of men to make their fortunes in any number of ways bestows upon those of James's fiction a greater liberty, one theirs intrinsically rather than learned or claimed. Patronage need not be a sexual matter, and therefore they have no need to manipulate and prey upon those they are attracted to, as occurs so frequently with their female counterparts.

The second of these recurrent themes, that of a 'failure to live' is Lambert Strether's difficulty in a nutshell. Being sent on his mission by Mrs. Newsome and meeting Chad, he is reminded of what he was as a young man and everything he expected of life. He sees in Chad, and in the young man's illicit relationship with Madame de Vionnet, all that life can hold and that he has failed to engage in.

Chad offered him, as always, a welcome in which the cordial and the formal—so far as the formal was the respectful—handsomely met;

and after he had expressed a hope that he would let him put him up for the night Strether was in full possession of the key, as it might have been called, to what had lately happened. If he had just thought of himself as old Chad was at sight of him thinking of him as older; he wanted to put him up for the night because he was ancient and weary. It could never be said the tenant of these quarters wasn't nice to him; a tenant who, if he might indeed now keep him, was probably prepared to work it all still more thoroughly. Our friend had in fact the impression that with the minimum of encouragement Chad would propose to keep him indefinitely; an impression in the lap of which one of his own possibilities seemed to sit. Madame de Vionnet had wished him to stay—so why didn't that happily fit? He could enshrine himself for the rest of his days in his young host's *chambre d'ami* and draw out these days in his young host's expense: there could scarce be greater logical expression of the countenance he had been moved to give. There was literally a minute—it was strange enough—during which he grasped the idea that as he *was* acting, as he could only act, he was inconsistent. The sign that the inward forces he had obeyed really hung together would be that—in default always of another career—he should promote the good cause by mounting guard on it. These things, during his first minutes, came and went; but they were after all practically disposed of as soon as he had mentioned his errand. He had come to say good-bye—yet that was only a part; so that from the moment Chad accepted his farewell the question of a more ideal affirmation gave way to something else. He proceeded with the rest of his business. 'You'll be a brute, you know—you'll be guilty of the last infamy—if you ever forsake her.' (381)

What Strether says to Chad are words as strong as any Jamesian character ever uttered to another. This passage is also as clear a demonstration as any to be found in James's oeuvre of what was revolutionary in his view of relationships between the genders.

Strether has spent the course of the novel investigating what Chad is doing in Europe, and the nature of the younger man's relationship to Madame de Vionnet. His 'embassy' was to ferret out whatever debauchery Chad Newsome had 'fallen victim' to, and to extricate him from it: instead, his inquiries lead to a reversal of his belief in the strictures of the New England morality he was supposed to be representing on Mrs. Newsome's part, as well as his own. Strether meets Madame de Vionnet and discovers her to be not a Lilith or a Jezebel, but rather a charming woman for whom he develops the greatest respect. He comes to know Chad and sees that the young man has not been enticed or beguiled in any way, but has throughout his time in Europe exercised his

own will in all his choices. Knowing the strength of Chad's will, which is sufficient if not overwhelming, Strether understands that the younger man has the opportunity to live in a way he himself did not. At the end of the novel, he knows it is Chad's fault and no one else's that he will give up his life with Madame de Vionnet for 'the world of grab' they have both emerged from.

Strether's conversion from materialistic Woollett society to graceful European aesthetics is illustrative of what was to James a newer, but deeply troubling source of human wrong, of 'evil'. The advent of Theodore Roosevelt as President had brought a change in American society, dismissing traditionally female aspects of life from public society in favour of a strongly masculine way of life that encouraged capitalism and Roosevelt's own ambitions as the leader of a new world order. James wrote to a friend in 1901 that he did not "either like or trust the new President, a dangerous and ominous Jingo...." (James 1984, 202). America was no longer the home he had left: it is not a place to return to, as Rowland Mallett does, but if anything a place of banishment as it will be for Adam Verver and Charlotte Stant in *The Golden Bowl*. Strether's European adventure introduces him not to a morally atrophied society but to a vital, creative one that, in the end, he cannot forsake.

James had a great deal of trouble with delineating physical relationships, but it is evident that Chad's relationship with Madame de Vionnet is that of a young man engaged in a sexual affair with an older woman who has a living husband as well as a daughter old enough to be presumed the object of her lover's interest. Madame de Vionnet is everything frowned upon by Puritan New England and Teddy Roosevelt's America: she is everything, physically and morally, that Strether was meant to rescue Chad from. Instead of her representing decaying European values, James has his hero Strether come to see her as a manifestation of moral and spiritual good. She is the

world he sees that he cast aside when he was a young man, not in his first marriage but in his reclusion after her death. Strether comes to view Chad as his younger self only to discard that idea as well when he realises, even as he makes his comment in the above passage, that Chad will give up that same spiritual freedom without the excuse of the trauma Strether endured.

The passage bears a distinct similarity to the conclusion of *A Portrait of a Lady* where Isabel rejects Caspar Goodwood, although Strether is free from the bruising physicality of the sexual patronage that Isabel was offered. Even at this point, when he has declined submission to Mrs. Newsome's commands and separated himself from the circles of Woollett society he emerged from, he can continue to live off the proceeds of that society's commerce. Chad will, if asked, financially support Strether with the family fortune that he will have control of should he return to the life his mother wishes him to live. He is the means of a discreet retirement that Woollett need not acknowledge, perhaps not even know about, as though he were an illegitimate child (he is, in effect, an illegitimate consequence of Chad's sojourn in Europe).

The overturning of the traditional moral order of the situation is clearer here than it usually is in James's fiction because of his combination of emotional and sexual attractiveness in a single morally positive character, Marie de Vionnet. She, and those characters that are sympathetic to her situation, stand directly opposed to commercial greed and spiritual objectification as represented by the spectre of Mrs. Newsome and Woollett society. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, this opposition is obscured by Ralph Touchett's position as the centre of moral and spiritual sympathy for Isabel while Lord Warburton and Osmond hold a physical attraction for her. In *The Wings of the Dove*, the reader faces an even greater challenge with its three protagonists, two of whom are initially morally ambiguous and a third, who, like Ralph, is terminally ill and thus

insulated from the suggestion of a sexual relationship. While Kate Croy chooses the downward spiral of turning even the people she loves into commodities, Merton Densher comes to recognise Milly as the moral epicentre of his life while remaining physically attracted to the greedy Kate even after he has made his choice not to betray Milly's memory.

Strether's dilemma is less ambiguous, if no easier than Isabel's or Densher's, because, although the moral divisions he comes to understand are more polarised than they are for the younger characters, he is limited by his age and by the emotional inability to make a choice that would make his life in many ways more comfortable. He knows in the conclusion of the novel that he could stay with Maria Gostrey, who would willingly be for him what Madame de Vionnet was for Chad Newsome, either physically or financially. Strether knows that he could not be for her what Chad was for his lover: his refusal is an acknowledgment of her opportunities. He has lost his chance through waiting too long: someone old enough to be seen by Chad as 'ancient and weary' is too old to engage in the spiritual elasticity of the physical union that is intrinsically part of what he envies of Chad's life. James resolves this final lack in his last completed novel, *The Golden Bowl*, where his protagonists endure their moral crises while they are still young enough to redeem their mistakes.

The character of Maria Gostrey often receives dismissive treatment at the hands of critics, the common refrain being that she is simply a *ficelle*, that she has no actively significant role in the plot.²⁰ This conclusion neglects her importance to Strether: she is his confidante, it is true, and much of her conversation is no more than reaction to his statements, rather than provoking discussion according to her own ideas. But for all her conversational submissiveness—she does not compromise so easily in other respects—

²⁰ Alwyn Berland, *Culture and Conduct in the Novels of Henry James*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 7.

Maria's gender and presence are necessary to Strether. Her prompts and suggestions bring him to conclusions he might not otherwise have reached. Her significance as a direct inversion of Mrs. Newsome, not simply as a comfortable counterpoint to the sterner woman, is often overlooked:

Miss Gostrey had dined with him at his hotel, face to face over a small table on which the lighted candles had rose-coloured shades; and the rose coloured shades and the small table and the soft fragrance of the lady – had anything to his mere sense ever been so soft? – were so many touches in he scarce knew what positive high picture. He had been to the theatre, even to the opera, in Boston, with Mrs. Newsome, more than once acting as her only escort; but there had been no little confronted dinner, no pink lights, no whiff of vague sweetness, as a preliminary: one of the results of which was that at present, mildly rueful, though with a sharpish accent, he actually asked himself *why* there hadn't. There was much the same difference in his impression of the noticed state of his companion, whose dress was 'cut down', as he believed the term to be, in respect to shoulders and bosom, in a manner quite other than Mrs. Newsome's, and who wore round her throat a broad red velvet band with an antique jewel—he was rather complacently sure it was antique—attached to it in front. Mrs. Newsome's dress was never in any degree 'cut down', and she never wore round her throat a broad red velvet band: if she had, moreover, would it ever have served so to carry on and complicate, as he now almost felt, his vision?

It would have been absurd of him to trace into ramifications the effect of the ribbon from which Miss Gostrey's trinket depended, had he not for the hour, at the best, been so given over to uncontrolled perceptions. What was it but an uncontrolled perception that his friend's velvet band somehow added, in her appearance, to the value of every other item—to that of her smile and of the way she carried her head, to that of her complexion, of her lips, her teeth, her eyes, her hair? What, certainly, had a man conscious of a man's work in the world to do with red velvet bands? He wouldn't for anything have so exposed himself as to tell Miss Gostrey how much he liked hers....
(33-4)

The presence of eroticism in James's fiction may be paradoxically bloodless, but passages such as these are at the least a concession to the undeniable presence of the impulse in human life, and arguably a good deal more than that. Edmond Volpe points out in "James's Theory of Sex in Fiction" (1958) that as James was reading the contemporary fiction coming out of France, and was in some instances friends with

those authors, he felt that the almost obsessive physicality of the characters and of the writing itself detracted from the emotional and moral dilemmas that to his mind governed human society. These French authors—Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola, the Goncourt brothers—were reacting against a tradition of tabooed sexuality and the repression of the physical, as James's contemporaries and successors were to do. James in his turn was reacting against them, not by denying the physical altogether, but in focussing on the visible and mental origins of those sensations rather than on the purely tactile and visceral. None of his characters feel the rush of a pulse, or the heat of a touch: but then, neither do they seem to get headaches or fevers or find the rain uncomfortable, which are likewise rather remarkable lacks in the course of daily life. Nor do any of his females have a propensity to faint, even when under intense emotional pressure. The reader's attention to the terminally ill Milly Theale is trained on her social activities rather than how she wastes away during her final attack. The physical hardness of these characters may be due as much to the easing of fashion on the female body as much as a shift in the perception of the female character, but, whatever the reasons, James's women are a pleasant departure from the Victorian tradition.

The relationships of Strether to Mrs. Newsome and Miss Gostrey within the story are possibly the clearest example to be found of the importance James invested in the union of the sexes. Mrs. Newsome is representative of a style of woman who would have been admired and likely frequently encountered in New England society of the time, at least in appearances. She has married once, she has produced well-groomed, potentially successful children (in the case of Chad; her daughter has already demonstrated her capability); she has lost her husband to natural causes, through no fault of her own. She depends on no one else for economic support, and although she

maintains a social relationship with a man who may one day be her partner in a second marriage, nothing in her behaviour can be considered morally compromising, or worse, foolish, by her neo-puritan Connecticut neighbours. If she is seen out at dinner and at the opera, she wears an austere black dress and does not sit at questionably small tables. The rigidity of her circumspect behaviour makes her an oppressive force within the novel, the worst extreme of 'bloodlessness'. James's early fiction often imparts an idea that Europe's age and decadence had bred a need to subvert American vitality to its withering greed: Strether is profoundly shocked to find that European culture still maintains an appreciation for a certain freedom of spirit that America has, by evidence of such specimens as Mrs. Newsome, lost. Mrs. Newsome has more in common with Madame Bellegarde's greed in *The American* than James himself would like to admit: she never appears in person in the novel, and thus never has to speak directly.

Contrast this image with Maria Gostrey: of a similar age to Mrs. Newsome and Madame de Vionnet, yet still unmarried, without children; she chooses to live in a place where her tastes and lifestyle will not be noticed, much less bring her a bad reputation. She occupies a curiously satisfying place among James's women: in her manner of dress and her taste in entertainment, as well as in her fondness for pink, she recalls Mademoiselle Noemie Nioche of *The American*, who brought Claire's charming brother Valentine Bellegarde to such a bad end. The visual descriptions of Maria, with her low cut dresses and her neck ribbon delineate the racier fashions of the period, recalling a portrait of Catherine 'Skittles' Walters who led a scandalous life among the wealthy and influential men of late Victorian London.²¹ James, with all of his social connections and attendance at dinner parties, could not have been ignorant of the tradition of the aristocratic courtesan. Maria Gostrey's social position, that of an

²¹ Altick pp. 537-9.

American woman in Europe, economically independent but not wealthy, single and still attractive but old enough to have school friends who are now the mothers of grown children, recalls both Serena Merle and Charlotte Stant. However, where Noemie Nioche and Serena Merle alienate the reader's sympathy through their manipulation of more sympathetic characters, and Charlotte maintains an illicit relationship for years, Maria is permitted to be both antithetical to prominent social conventions and the locus of a positive moral truth in the novel.

James thought a good deal about the intellectual, spiritual relationship between the genders. In 1901 he wrote of the subject in a review of the work of Mathilde de Serao:

The female mind has in fact throughout the competition carried off the prize in the familiar game, known to us all from childhood's hour, of playing at 'grown-up'; finding thus its opportunity, with no small acuteness, in the more and more marked tendency of the mind of the other gender to revert...to those simplicities which there would appear to be some warrant for pronouncing puerile. It is the ladies in a word who have lately done most to remind us of man's relations with himself, that is with woman. (James 1987, 346.)

Maria, in her relationship to Strether, is a demonstration of this succinctly articulated idea: similar to Ralph in his relationship to Isabel, though far less painfully, Maria Gostrey is the feminine understanding that Strether lacks. She is as important to his development as Marie de Vionnet, but in achieving that understanding, James requires that Strether comprehend the vital similarity between them without subsuming his life into hers. What remains in James's demonstration of his ideals is a successful combination of moral achievement, sexual compatibility, and social union.

Henry James, more than simply not granting his characters a second chance, concludes their stories in such a fashion as to make this lack absolute. Isabel Archer and Merton Densher and so many of his other characters are young, by any standards, at the end of the novels they inhabit, and yet the reader knows they have achieved

permanence in their lives. It is not just some aspect of their character that is fixed and will affect future choices and decisions: a conclusion has been reached that precludes any further development in a positive direction, beyond the time frame of the novel. Carren Kaston attributes this finality to a 'too late' theme.²² It is indeed too late for Strether, not because of a moulding of character or destiny, but because of the part played by Strether's free will in his own spiritual desiccation. This is troubling to his readers, and has been a challenge to his critics since the first appearances of the novels, most strikingly in the cases of *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*. More than a century after their publications, the conclusions of these novels are still frequently haggled over.

Strether's action at the end of *The Ambassadors* serves the same purpose as Isabel's, if less obvious to Maria Gostrey and those around him (although it should not be so to the reader). Strether as a young man lost, along with his wife, the appreciation of the vibrancy of culture, and allowed himself to be strapped into the narrow confines of American post puritan morality as represented by Woollett society and his subservience to Mrs. Newsome. He meets Chad and comes to understand all that the younger man has, and is giving up, in Madame de Vionnet; and while this knowledge is Strether's tragic understanding and inspires such strong language as is to be found anywhere in James's fiction, it cannot inspire or be the means of liberating him. Strether makes a choice just as Isabel did, and is offered more tempting alternatives than Isabel found. He is charmed first by the idea of himself and Maria Gostrey as 'the Babes in the Wood' (372), then by the prospects of Chad's support and marriage to Maria, 'the offer of exquisite service, of lightened care, for the rest of his days...' (393). Maria, however, is not made for exquisite servitude: Strether has learned too

²² Carren Kaston, *Imagination and Desire in the Novels of Henry James*. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1894), p. 87.

much. To take any of these options would have been more than the acceptance of a certain relief, or even a reprieve: it would have been a denial of the value, of the enormity of everything he had so blindly passed over in his life. Perhaps he cannot propose marriage to Maria Gostrey because he is equally struck with the charms of Madame de Vionnet; but Marie (her proximity to Maria Gostrey is marked by the similarity of their names) is not simply a human being for Strether, a social acquaintance and a younger man's mistress. She represents the quality of beauty that Strether has been alienated from for so long that he forgot it. Maria is a lesser variety of the same, permitted to be physical for Strether, and in accepting her invitation he would make himself guilty of the denial that he had ever committed an injustice to life in the first place. He cannot, in the end, 'get anything out for himself', because he cannot reverse time and make himself innocent again: to do so would have turned James's elegant and weighty tragedy into something like *The Europeans* of 1878: a light, entertaining social comedy.

The Ambassadors cannot be classified as a feminist novel in the sense that, although there are many female characters of considerable influence in the story, it is not a woman's story. It is not like the other novels of James's later career, dealing so primarily with the question of a woman's marriage. The question of Maria's and Madame de Vionnet's futures is relative to the actions of Strether and Chad towards them: they do not undergo any fundamental change during the story, being as much on the side of the angels at the beginning as they are at the end. It is the question of two marriages, but this time concerns the dilemmas of the men, men who find themselves in the position usually occupied by women. Both Strether and Chad are offered wealthy, secure marriages, if they will only submit to the wishes of society, and in Chad's case, his family, and give up the bohemian, uncommon way in which they live. The story is

remarkable for applying to men the social and emotional pressures usually faced by women in the Victorian world, demonstrating a basic similarity that was commonly held not to exist.

CHAPTER IV
LOVE AS COMMODITY IN *THE WINGS OF THE DOVE*

The last period of James's career was termed his 'major phase' by F. O. Matthiessen, a phrasing which has endured in the ensuing decades of criticism.²³ After the successes of *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Daisy Miller*, *What Maisie Knew*, and *The Ambassadors*, James's income and reputation were secure. It is interesting, in the light of his reputation for such elevated thought and challenging prose, established by such works, that his next novel is one of the most commonly referenced examples of his reputation for melodramatic and sometimes distinctly vulgar plots. *The Wings of the Dove* is the story of a love triangle that might do justice to any soap opera. Merton Densher is the enterprising journalist who attracts the attentions of two alluring women: one, the fabulously wealthy and terminally ill American, Milly Theale; the other, the stunningly beautiful Kate Croy, whose attachment to Densher has been forbidden by the aunt she depends on for financial support.

Kate Croy has the classic beauty of the typical romantic heroine, and she faces a classic variety of dilemma. She has to choose between pursuing her relationship with Densher or the money her aunt Maud Lowder will settle on her if she encourages the attentions of Lord Mark, a titled aristocrat who has a fondness for both Kate and her aunt's wealth. Like Austen's Lizzy Bennet, Kate has a small income from her own family, and is initially uncomfortable with the idea of sacrificing her genuine emotional ties to wealth and an aristocratic title. But where Lizzy was prepared to face even spinsterhood rather than compromise, Kate continues to look for a loophole. She sees the condition of her father and sister, subsisting on an income far lower than that they were brought up on, and the frustration it causes them; she wishes, early in the novel,

²³ F. O. Matthiessen, *Henry James: The Major Phase*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

that she were a man, in order to have preserved the respect of her father's family name. Acknowledging that she is not, and that circumstance has combined with femininity to provide her an opportunity to gain wealth beyond simple comfort, she cannot bring herself to dismiss what her aunt offers and requires of her.

When she meets and becomes friends with a young American heiress, Milly Theale, she conceives a plan that will gratify both her desires. She sees the affection that Milly also has for Densher, and with the unsettling accuracy that so many of James's villains have for understanding the natures of their victims, she calculates that Milly will make Densher her heir after her impending and unavoidable death. All that it requires is Densher's collusion in encouraging Milly's affections. The ramifications of this stratagem demonstrate the conditions and choices that turn a young woman with the initial capacity to love and be loved into someone who cannot choose human faith over material comfort.

It is easy to see that *The Wings of the Dove* is all about money. It is all about the fact that Kate and Densher cannot be happy unless they get money. It is no use our saying they could have married without it; their personal and class premises make a grubby survival in Chelsea, like that of Kate's sister, inconceivable—and Susan Stringham's example (like Henrietta Stackpole's in *The Portrait of a Lady*) of the independent woman who earns her own living is simply not available to Kate as an alternative. Though Densher offers at the end to marry her without Milly's fortune, Kate knows perfectly well that this is impossible, and her offer to dispense with Milly's money if he can swear he is not in love with her memory is made with the knowledge that he cannot make that avowal. But the calculus of gain has governed their relations in a more subtle way also. In this novel James present through symbolic action and language the reflex of a commercial society in the recesses of private life. With extraordinary insight into the nature of modern experience, he recognises that it is not sufficiently descriptive of modern man to say that he is subject to a market economy and constantly engaged in a contest for economic advantage. The competitive establishment of market value extends to those parts of a person, those aspects of behaviour, once thought to have *incalculable* value. (Bell 291-2)

Millicent Bell states later in her essay that while Milly is a second edition of Isabel Archer, Kate is a third version, a negative of the 'portrait'; less the young Serena Merle than what Isabel might have become if she had not become independently wealthy (Bell 300). The inaccuracy of this analysis is that Kate is fundamentally, destructively, pragmatic in her view of the world: her application of 'market values' to the people around her creates her downfall. Had Isabel possessed even a glimmer of the same faculty, she could never have been the tragic heroine that she and Milly Theale become. What ultimately holds the greatest value for Isabel and Milly is that the grace, even the simple aesthetic (insofar as the aesthetic can be applied to an action of will rather than physical motion or material substance) beauty of what they can be seen giving is more important to them than the degree of luxury in which they live. Had Kate been offered Isabel's choices at the conclusion of *The Portrait of a Lady*, Kate would have gone with Goodwood, not because she is more comfortable with her sexuality than Isabel, but because she possesses the same ability to use people for what they can give her that Osmond does. Kate, unlike Isabel, cannot conceive that a moral wrong could ever be more egregious than social discomfort.

Kate's direct antecedent is Serena Merle, but she also recalls Morris Townsend of *Washington Square*. Kate is far more complicated a being than Townsend: Catherine Sloper is nothing to him in an emotional sense, which makes such a travesty of Mrs. Penniman's machinations. Kate feels as deeply towards Merton Densher as she ever could for a man; she even feels genuine affection for Milly Theale, although that emotion may not run very deep. But she cannot see anything in her life as being of 'incalculable value': if a comfortable upper class life must be ransomed with the only passion she knows, she will pay that price. If she will not accept mediocrity in her life,

neither will she accept compromise, nor the knowledge that even Densher himself accepts life with her only because he once promised it.

The objectification of spirit that is so pernicious a habit in *The Portrait of a Lady* is diversified in this novel. Maud Lowder occupies the place of Gilbert Osmond, without his obsession with the aesthetic: she is quite content to think of life as a matter of class and finance. Culture and its objects are accoutrements, not intrinsically necessary, and taste does not rule wealth. Thus Kate's association with Densher is permissible so long as Kate can prove to her aunt that she will not place anything over material advantage. Kate, on the other hand, does not lose sight of spirit and personality even though she cannot choose them over material comfort. She loves Densher for a spiritual connection she feels with him, and she continues to love him even after she has sacrificed him to her material comfort. She is not intent on turning anyone into an object simply to be looked at: indeed, her manipulation of Milly requires that Milly feel much the same vitality of emotion that she herself does, so that Milly's generosity can match her greed. Kate knows as well as Serena Merle that she has been vile.

The only factor that Kate does not take absolutely for granted is Densher. Even before Milly comes into the picture, they do not simply exchange vows and tokens of their passion: they question each other on it. Their last parting before Kate leaves for the place where she will meet Milly is as much a negotiation of who will be held responsible for lying as it is the parting of two lovers, however intelligent.²⁴ Kate's classically mercenary plan shifts the tension of the story from her choice between love and money to his choice between Kate's greed and Milly's sincerity. The most vulgar element of the plot elevates it out of the realm of vulgarity: the love triangle becomes a

²⁴ *The Wings of the Dove* pp.118-120.

question of whether sexual and material gratifications are ultimately more powerful than moral and emotional sincerity.

Kate is, aesthetically, an idealised portrait of a fashionable young Englishwoman of the time: she is beautiful, she is clever, she is accomplished and socially successful, despite the consciousness of her maternal aunt Maud Lowder having 'raised her up' from the condition her father landed the family in through his profligate habits. Merton Densher is her match in looks, wit, and the social standing they were born to, but Mrs. Lowder, in her role as "Britannia of the Market Place" (73) deems the match materially denigrating to Kate and forbids it. In spite of this prohibition placed on their relationship, they become secretly engaged. They are two beautiful young people, which makes their love affair unexceptional, particularly within the aesthetic consciousness of Henry James's vision. However, their love has an intellectual vitality uncommon in the Victorian literary tradition, and the physicality between them is as explicit as James ever allowed himself to be in his fiction. More than anything else, it is the terms in which the couple declare their feelings for one another that make them so unusual:

'I'm not afraid of the inquisition. If she asks if there's anything definite between us I know perfectly what I shall say.'

'That I am of course "gone" for you?'

'That I love you as I shall never in my life love any one else, and that she can make what she likes out of that.' She said it out so splendidly that it was like a new profession of faith, the fullness of a tide breaking through; and the effect of that in turn was to make her companion meet her with such eyes that she had time again before he could otherwise speak. . . .

There *was* a difference in the air—even if none other than the supposedly usual difference in truth between man and woman; and it was almost as if the sense of this provoked her. She seemed to cast about an instant, and then she went back a little resentfully to something she had suffered to pass a minute before. She appeared to take up rather more seriously than she need the joke about her

freedom to deceive. Yet she did this too in a beautiful way. 'Men are too stupid—even you. You didn't understand just now why, if I post my letters myself, it won't be for anything so vulgar as to hide them.'

'Oh you named it—for the pleasure.'

'Yes; but you didn't, you don't understand what the pleasure may be. There are refinements—!' she more patiently dropped. 'I mean of consciousness, of sensation, of appreciation,' she went on. 'No,' she sadly insisted—'men *don't* know. They know in such matters almost nothing but what women show them.'

This was one of the speeches, frequent in her, that, liberally, joyfully, intensely adopted and, in itself, as might be, embraced, drew him again as close to her, and held him as long, as their conditions permitted. 'Then that's exactly why we've such an abysmal need of you!' (119-20)

It is a challenge to call to mind a pair of lovers from another Victorian novel explaining their feelings about and to one another in such a fashion. Kate's comments in particular are striking: women had long before demonstrated in their fiction their capacity for independent judgement of men, even men they cared for emotionally, but Kate has few precedents in telling her lover so explicitly that men "know in such matters almost nothing but what women show them." Respect for intellect and creativity has been present in love affairs before—it was important to Charlotte Brontë's lovers—but it was never before such an element of fascination and, more importantly, of the passion between lovers.

This is a far cry from the popular Victorian formula for the ideal (in this case, prospective) husband and wife, certainly not what Ruskin would have endorsed: it is the man who is meant to show the woman how to appreciate, not the other way around.²⁵ Kate does not achieve her significance for Densher by simply being beautiful or showing promise as a socially successful mistress of a household. She certainly doesn't attract him by being a morally good and submissive girl as a heroine of Dickens's would have done. Kate's boldness in making statements such as 'men are stupid' to a man's face is not a quality one would have expected would win over the

anxieties of the Victorian lover, but it works on well enough on Densher. One could imagine Kate hitting it off very well with Thackeray's Becky Sharp, but Thackeray would never have allowed a character such as Densher, who is guilty of some terrible things but never loses his potential for moral good, to fall in love with either Becky Sharp or Kate. Intellectual passion has here become a necessary element in James's lovers, which marks an evolution from his Victorian predecessors.

Kate is a step forward for feminist considerations in literature because in the course of the development of the novel as a form that reflects society, Henry James as a master of that form begins to test and expand the conception of what truly makes a woman both inherently feminine and sexually desirable. Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot created fascinating, intelligent heroines; but they never created a sexually and socially desirable woman capable of so directly influencing a man's judgement and actions. The moral complexity of the situation Kate, Milly, and Densher are involved in is of a degree that has been rare, if not altogether lacking, since Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Kate Croy has literary precedents, but her relationship to Densher has not. Through much of her plotting, he continues to love her, and even as they separate he holds to his word, offering to marry her 'in an hour'.

Milly Theale is, on the surface, a more typical Victorian heroine. She is innocent and wealthy and pale and dies of a wasting illness, leaving all her money to a man she believes does not love her. Her virtues enable the villain to make a victim of her as she becomes the means to a material end for Kate and the impetus of moral growth for Densher. As the story develops, she becomes in her own way as unusual as the more vibrant Kate: her relevance to the imagery and the underlying ideas in the novel is more

²⁵ John Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens", reprinted in *Sesame and Lilies; Unto This Last; The Political Economy of Art*, (London: Cassell, 1907), pp. 61-95.

complex. Her first physical appearance, in book three, associates her with the delicacy and unpredictability of a bird, as well as being a princess to her friend Mrs. Stringham. These connotations identify her with the dove of the title, which in turn makes her the focus of the Christian imagery and thematic content of the novel. Lisa Appignanesi, in her discussion of *The Wings of the Dove*, goes back to the biblical source of James's title, and quotes Psalm 55 in full:

And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away
and be at rest./ Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the
wilderness... for I have seen violence and strife in the city... /
Wickedness is in the midst thereof: deceit and guile depart not from her
streets. / For it was not an enemy that reproached me; then I could have
borne it: neither was it he that hated me that did magnify himself against
me; then I would have hid myself from him: / But it was thou, a man,
mine equal, my guide and mine acquaintance. / We took sweet counsel
together...He hath put forth his hands against such as be at peace with
him: he hath broken his covenant. / The words of his mouth were
smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than
oil, yet they were drawn swords.²⁶

Appignanesi points out how Milly's deception echoes the lament made here.

James's translation of the Biblical poem into Victorian action is remarkable. It is even more remarkable that it is the figure of Milly who embodies the speaker in the psalm, Milly's voice that may be taken to say "...it was thou, a man, mine equal, my guide and mine acquaintance..." particularly as it is Kate who is most explicit about wishing for manhood. The echoing of Milly's grief to this passage is one of the most direct comments James makes about the spiritual and emotional equality between genders. Biblical and Christian metaphors for women were popular throughout the period: there was, of course, the ubiquitous Angel in the House, as well as figures such as

²⁶ quoted by Lisa Appignanesi in *Femininity and the Creative Imagination*. (London: Vision Press, 1973), p. 61.

Rachel, Dante's Beatrice, and Saint Theresa of Avila. Women as models of patience, sacrifice, and resignation were revered; the identification of a female character with a voice of reproach and righteous anger, even as delicate a one as Milly Theale is, was harder to come by.

Milly also brings James back to his cousin Minny Temple and *The Portrait of a Lady*. Again he takes for his heroine a young American woman with an attitude of being the intrepid explorer into London society, this time giving her his cousin's initials. The two novels are closely related, through the similarities between Isabel Archer and Milly Theale and their relationships to Serena Merle and Kate Croy. Unlike Isabel Archer, however, Milly Theale is independently wealthy, and, like James's cousin, her fate is dictated by the physical illness that will kill her before the conclusion of the novel. Milly Theale is again Minny Temple given new life, but she is not granted the compromised freedom that Isabel escapes with; she is bound by a death sentence that she learns of early in the course of the story. The intense refrain of Isabel in *The Portrait of a Lady* is that she wants 'to see for herself': Milly, having no difficulty in seeing things for herself from the outset, makes the further resolution to live as fully as she can. If she had held back and allowed herself only to see what was around her, it would have saved her from a measure of pain; but it would also have excluded her from what little opportunity for experience she had left. Milly's Madame Merle assumes the form of Kate Croy, far more (necessarily) Milly's equal in age and attractiveness than was Serena in relation to Isabel. Serena Merle in Isabel's story is a woman with a daughter of marriageable age, someone whose way of life has been chosen long ago. Kate is an insight into Serena making her choices, magnified in that Kate's gamble lacks the shade of altruism that softens Serena's cruelty. Serena fed Isabel to the wolf that is Gilbert Osmond because Isabel's fortune would make her

daughter Pansy's life more comfortable; Kate's choice is for herself alone. She sees the life her father and sister have chosen, and even what love she feels for them, even the strength of her love for Merton Densher (and James makes sure we know it is strong), cannot overcome her own revulsion at being trapped in the same inadequate lifestyle.

The object of both girls' affection is not the usual hero: he does not fight injustice, is neither soldier nor nobleman, impoverished or otherwise. He *is* somewhat of a renegade, impressing acquaintances with intelligence and charm in a world where money and taste are sovereign. He does not have the bruising masculinity of Basil Ransom, Caspar Goodwood, or Lord Warburton: he is instead more akin to Ralph Touchett, albeit much healthier, poorer, and better looking. One feels that if another Victorian author had had the writing of the story, Merton Densher would in the first place never have attracted the reader's sympathy; secondly he would not have had the redemption that James grants him in giving his ultimatum to Kate. Milly Theale's unfortunate ending would have also been different: she would have either not have granted him the rich legacy that she does, or the necessary condition for her forgiveness of his crime against her would have been a definite knowledge of his remorse, which she never has.

The shift of Densher's love from dedication to Kate to the memory of Milly's generosity is, like Milly herself, an example of James's conformity to Victorian tastes. Milly, with her imagery of being small and dove-like and pale, is a glorification of the innocence of Victorian femininity, and Densher's appreciation of her denotes a new understanding in him that there is such a thing as innocence, that altruism is possible. James departs from the Victorian norm in Densher's choices after he receives news of Milly's death. Milly's characteristic identification with doves marks her as the voice in

the psalm 55, but the words can also be understood as spoken by Densher to Kate, reiterating the fundamental spiritual equality between man and woman and between lovers. Densher's understanding of Milly's actions, and his own sins of omission and deception, requires that he not continue in the ways that have become so easy for him. This means, perversely, that, having so desired to marry Kate while colluding in her scheme, he must maintain his offer to her, instead of reviling her as one might expect. Milly also allows James to create an interesting variation on the tragic figure of Merton Densher: the sympathy between the two characters established by his love for her allows her to take on the physical burden of sacrifice and death, thereby allowing him to achieve tragic understanding without the necessarily bleak future Isabel Archer accepts in the conclusion of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Kate tells Densher that "her memory's [his] love" (509), and it might be safely assumed that he'll never meet another woman he could care for as he now does for Milly, but this does not necessarily entail that he has no social future, or that he will never again experience emotional intimacy.

The clash of American and European values is not intrinsic to this story as it was to *The Ambassadors*, published only the year before. Milly Theale is indeed the intrepid American explorer taking part in a European odyssey, but the nature of her mistakes has far less to do with her national situation than her predecessor Isabel's did. Milly does not have her life ahead of her, and an ambition of accomplishing some grand, vaguely philanthropic gesture. Seeing and collecting art is not enough for this girl aware of her severely limited time among civilisation: she wants to live it and be it before death robs her of the opportunity. Europe is, as it is in every other of James's novels, the best place to immerse oneself in culture, and she does so. When she finds

herself faced with a choice between two suitors—Lord Mark and Merton Densher—it is not a matter of an American future versus a European one. It is not a question of a future at all: life hounded by physical rather than spiritual death is a crucial element in the story, and Milly's consciousness of that limit is a unique feature in his longer fictions. Ralph Touchett of *The Portrait of a Lady* of course acts on the knowledge of his impending death: the differences are that his death is not as immediate or premature as Milly's, and that he is not so primary a protagonist, as Milly. Life does not hold the savour for him that it does for Milly: he chooses disengagement rather than immersion in it.

As for Milly's romantic options, she is not given a choice between suitors of different nationalities; Lord Mark and Merton Densher are the only serious considerations, and either choice would make her an expatriate. Nor is there any indication that, had Milly's death not been a fact forestalling her future, she would have found anything painful in assuming such a life. Given the state of Densher's character at the conclusion of the novel, had he been able to achieve moral integrity without Milly's death, her American nationality would have been of greater necessity than it is. It would have given her a cultural freedom to marry an Englishman who had to work for his money as readily as she might have married an aristocratic one. Unfortunately his moral growth requires her death, and the example of her generosity: otherwise his remorse might not have been strong enough a force.

The difference between Mark and Densher is thus not nationality but class, and this difference is present more in the perspective of Lancaster gate, presided over by the materially-minded Maud Lowder, than it is in either Milly's or Susan Stringham's consciousness. Densher does not have sufficient standing to come calling for Kate under any pretence at Lancaster gate; but he meets Milly long before Kate does, having

"been three or four times in [Mrs. Stringham's] house" (143) just before Milly's own stay there. Milly's American identity is crucial in this respect: her fortune combines with her nationality to give her a freedom among social classes that not even Isabel Archer had, the latter bound by an obligation of gratitude where Milly has only the fact of heredity. An English woman in Milly's position would not have had the social freedom to interact with both Densher and the milieu of Lancaster gate as Milly herself does: Kate is aware of this, and her envy destroys her.

Whatever James's conscious intentions might have been, this story, as well as its predecessors, offers a refutation of social Darwinism. Merton Densher, in turning from Kate to Milly, may not typify Victorian sentimentality, but he definitely echoes it, albeit with a certain moral vitality that is often lacking in the common run of such reformed rakes. Kate and Milly, on the other hand, are as plain as they come as rejections of the Darwinian scheme of marriage. Kate and Lord Mark act in accordance to that pattern, and it gains them nothing: Kate is perhaps the best example of where such a life may lead. She is pretty, she is intelligent, and she looks for her own kind: but, finding that acceptance of these gifts will not, as it were, bring her further up 'the food chain', she attempts to climb her way up, exploiting available resources and dragging her chosen mate with her. In the process Kate loses everything except the patronage of her blood relative: both women are left with nothing but the attachment to class and wealth that they had to begin with.

In an unusual move for James during the course of his career as artist, the aesthetic impulse is less of a motive for his forceful protagonists than the pragmatic and financial ends of life. Kate, Densher, and Milly are less preoccupied with (which is not to say utterly indifferent to) how the world sees them in an aesthetic sense than they are with how they see themselves, their own actions, and what they see around them.

Indeed, each of them has their own reasons for wishing they were not so closely observed by the world. Kate is dominated by the desire for material comfort, and, finding that material comfort excludes emotional truth, she sacrifices her love.

Densher's course of discovery takes him to the opposite end, finding that material comfort is meaningless to him when its price is moral compromise. Milly is concerned with the aesthetic, with making herself the metaphorical dove over the abyss,²⁷ but she is not concerned that the society around her should see what she is doing, only that Densher and Kate do. Becoming an art object, a 'portrait', is not the damaging process it is to Isabel; indeed Milly demonstrates on several occasions that she is both conscious of and apparently undisturbed by it.

Returning to what makes Kate such a masterful example of James's skill, she is among the most psychologically sophisticated of his villains. Her transgressions are the worse because the moral fibre she lacks that might have kept her from her manipulations is such a slender thread: we see her struggling, even as she seeks to define her love for Densher, the material greed that is going to overcome that love, the one failure of courage that makes criminal waste of all of Kate's virtues. Those that came before her—Mrs. Bellegarde, Christina Light, Gilbert Osmond—are shocking characters because any beauty seen in them is revealed in their stories to be nothing more than a reflection of their victims' desires. Because Kate might have so easily fulfilled the expectations she encouraged in those around her, her fall, her 'abyss', is the most harrowing of those James created.

²⁷ Jean Kimball, 'The Image As Revelation', in *Henry James: Modern Judgements* ed. by Tony Tanner. (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 266-82.

CHAPTER V
THE ACHIEVEMENT OF EQUALITY IN *THE GOLDEN BOWL*

The Golden Bowl is the last of James's completed novels, published in 1904. It deals with a theme that James had illustrated before in his short story 'The Marriages' (1891):²⁸ namely, the treachery and manipulation that can destroy the emotional relationship within marriage. *The Golden Bowl* is a more sophisticated experiment with this aspect of the human heart, and one in which James has so developed the diffidence of his narrative style as to risk alienating his readership. In 1902 Frank Moore Colby published his colourful and concise assessment of James's combination of racy subjects with his elaborate sophistication of words:

Any other man would have been suppressed. In a literature so well policed as ours, the position of Henry James was anomalous. He was the only writer of the day whose unconventional notions did not matter. His dissolute and complicated muse might say just what she chose. Perhaps this was because it would have been so difficult to expose him. Never did such "vice" go with such tempering vagueness. Whatever else may be said of James at this time, he was no tempter, and though the novels of this period deal only with unlawful passions, they make but chilly reading on the whole. It is a land where the vices have no bodies and the passions no blood, where nobody sins because nobody has anything to sin with.²⁹

Colby's comments about James here deal with the novels that preceded the writing and publication of *The Golden Bowl*, but James made no major alterations in his style for his last work. The comment remains relevant in terms of James's ability to discuss explicit sexual matters without enunciating a single word that would have had him censored by even the most prudish of critics. Several decades later, F. R. Leavis held this delicacy and circumlocution to be James's greatest fault, locating the author's

²⁸ Holland p. 351.

²⁹ Frank Colby Moore as quoted in *Henry James: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Graham Clarke, 4 vols (Near Robertsbridge: Helm Information, 1991) II: p. 17.

strongest artistic expression in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Awkward Age*.³⁰

Barbara Leckie, however, reasons in "A National Habit of Repression" (1999) that James's work is not so much anomalous as indispensable, indeed a god-send to his audience, precisely because of this paradoxical refinement of language. James himself had been aware for decades that young women made up a great deal of the reading public. He felt it a lamentable feature of the society he lived in that so much of Britain's cultural heritage, not to mention contemporary art, should be circumscribed and abridged to preserve an innocence that was hardly natural or beneficial.³¹

In the writing of his last completed novel, James somewhat refutes the allegation of vagueness. Metaphor and imagery, such as the long passage relating Prince Amerigo's impression of and physical desire for Charlotte Stant, relieve, at least partially, James's reputation for ignoring the physical:

He saw again that her thick hair was, vulgarly speaking, brown, but that there was a shade of tawny autumn leaf in it, for 'appreciation'—a colour indescribable and of which he had known no other case, something that gave her at moments the sylvan head of a huntress. He saw the sleeves of her jacket drawn to her wrists, but he again made out the free arms within them to be of the completely rounded, polished slimness that Florentine sculptors, in the great time, had loved.... He knew her narrow hands, he knew her long fingers and the shape and colour of her finger-nails, he knew her special beauty of movement and line when she turned her back, and the perfect working of all her main attachments, that of some wonderful finished instrument, something intently made for exhibition, for a prize. He knew above all the extraordinary fineness of her flexible waist, the stem of an expanded flower, which gave her a likeness also to some long, loose silk purse, well filled with gold pieces, but having been passed, empty, through a finger-ring that held it together. (35-6)

His "vices [having] no bodies and passions no blood" is still demonstrably true even in *The Wings of the Dove*, where Merton and Kate fall in love with each other in the rather

³⁰ F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), pp. 154-72.

³¹ Leckie 164-5.

bizarre metaphor of two people having come face to face at the top of ladders which have been climbed in order to see into the neighbouring gardens (*The Wings of the Dove*, 89). By the time of *The Golden Bowl*, however, passages such as the one above defy the appellation 'bloodless'. Analogies to inanimate objects remain, but Amerigo is definitely looking at Charlotte's body, and his contemplations are a deal more sensual than Strether's observations. The sin of objectification hovers: Amerigo may not be thinking of earning money in loving Charlotte, but his impression of her at the Assingham's is not of the intangible beauties of her soul, nor of her clothes and jewellery. Despite this, Charlotte and the Prince are far more sensual than aesthetic in their adultery, and, more so than most of James's creations, the characters of this novel are physical. Their physical contact to each other is not coincidental or pragmatic: they touch their surroundings and each other because they want to.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, physical contact between characters is rare, articulation at moments of extreme emotional stress is a challenge, and the metaphors arise from images and themes that are striking in their incongruity to the situation at hand. In this last novel, characters frequently touch, indeed embrace, in affection and attraction. They still have great difficulty in saying exactly what they mean, particularly in speaking to the person they ought to be speaking to, but the Ververs accomplish more by way of articulation of emotion than previous characters such as Isabel Archer or Milly Theale. Maggie speaks directly to Fanny Assingham of her understanding that the Prince and Charlotte are having an affair (Chapter 33), and more than once the reader is provided with her internal monologue of everything she can't quite bring herself to say to her husband of her understanding. Milly Theale's actions are comprehended perfectly by everyone involved, but her desires are not as explicit as James allows Maggie's to be.

There is no denouement to the story of Amerigo and Maggie: the novel ends with their reconciliation, and even this finality is debatable. This feature of *The Golden Bowl*, the ambiguity of its ending, removes the work from the correlation of Victorian fiction and sets it in the realm of the modern novel. With very few exceptions before James (notably Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Dickens's *Great Expectations*), novelists seemed incapable of ending their works without a short synopsis of the fates of their prominent characters. The best known works of the nineteenth century feature endings structured according to this formula. The moral purpose of the story is fixed, and to admit or encourage speculation on the part of the reader as to the further adventures of any character in question would be to compromise that moral purpose. James, perhaps because of his love of the theatre and his frustrated ambitions of being a dramatist, is not afraid to treat his novelistic fictions as episodic.

A play typically takes one event or a limited span of time and examines how a truth of life or human experience may work in that frame. Victorian novelists, on the other hand, usually preferred to look at how these truths operated throughout a lifetime: even if the last thirty or forty years of that life must be summarised into the final pages of the novel, there is very rarely opportunity to refute what has been learned by the characters during the narrative. James distanced himself from his literary forebears by using an extended form of prose to examine with spotlight intensity the motives of his characters over limited intervals. He proved that the truths illustrated in this fashion may be just as resonant as those hammered out from every significant event of a lifetime.

What maintains James's affinity to the Victorian literary tradition in this novel are the themes illustrated by the marriages of the Ververs. An idea emergent in his earlier novels and that shared metaphorical space with the visual and Christian imagery of *The*

Wings of the Dove is in *The Golden Bowl* the most prominent of narrative features, overwhelming the significance of the titular image: the novel is an exploration of the quantification and commercialisation of the human spirit. In *The Wings of the Dove* the mercantile society is something that we are shown Kate walking into and surrounded by before we see her unequivocal choice to become a part of it. The opening of James's last novel sees his characters already inside it, as though they can find no other way to express themselves but in terms of commerce and consumption:

The young man, in his actual mood, could have smiled again—smiled delicately, as he had then smiled at her. 'Has it been his motive in letting me have you?'

'Yes, my dear, positively—or in a manner,' she had said... '...You're at any rate a part of his collection,' she had explained—'one of the things that can only be got over here. You're a rarity, an object of beauty, an object of price. You're not perhaps absolutely unique, but you're so curious and eminent that there are very few others like you—you belong to a class about which everything is known. You're what they call a *morceau de musée*.'

'I see. I have the great sign of it,' he had risked—'that I cost a lot of money'.

'I haven't the least idea, she had gravely answered, 'what you cost'—and he had adored, for the moment, her way of saying it. He had felt even, for the moment, vulgar. But he had made the best of that. 'Wouldn't you find out if it were a question of parting with me? My value would in that case be estimated.'

She looked at him with her charming eyes, as if his value were well before her. 'Yes, if you mean that I'd pay rather than lose you.'
(9-10)

This passage is part of that which introduces the Prince and Maggie as his fiancée to the reader. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, what made Osmond and Madame Merle such viperous characters in the story is the way in which they can look at Isabel and see only how her accomplishments and virtues make her such a lovely 'portrait', not to mention how her inheritance may make their own lives comfortable. This objectification of life and spirit is particularly insidious for James because it stands so close to the appreciation of art that he felt was such a virtue. In the work of Thackeray and George

Eliot, the love of art falls mostly in the realm of surface values, and there is often a perilous distance between appearance and reality. Holding the luxury of art in such esteem is at best a lack of good sense in a character, as Dorothea's sister Kitty in *Middlemarch* does no one any harm, but she is incurably frivolous and does no one any real good, either.

In *The Golden Bowl*, the two characters with whom the reader is presumably to have the most sympathy throughout the novel are already so involved in their taste for appearances that the dissonance of moral irregularity is all but imperceptible. The reader's only clue is in the narrator's observations on the abstract dread felt by the Prince on the loss of his freedom to marriage. He is, for one, older than his fiancée, and has had a more integral role in planning the union: he knows he has sold himself, but it is his choice. Maggie is all wide-eyed innocence: it never occurs to her that there might be something wrong in talking about what her father has paid to get her a husband, despite seeming to be genuinely in love with the man to whom she's engaged.

The attraction between Charlotte and the Prince is another re-writing of that between Kate Croy and Merton Densher. They love but they may never marry because their combined incomes would not be as much as they consider necessary. Also, on the part of the Prince and (abstractly) of Kate, there is also the burden of heritage, of a family name. These unions, of Charlotte and the Prince and of Kate and Densher are initially the only valid spiritual relationships in their stories, because they are not based in terms of currency. They survive only as long as there is no deeper, more sincere feeling on the part of another character to illumine the shortfalls. The genius of Kate and Charlotte is to see the appeal of the invaluable because tangible luxury cannot be afforded: in so doing they can perceive a valid intellectual, emotional impulse in things and in relationships that most of the people they are surrounded with are too jaded to be

aware of. They touch on something that goes beyond the usual gender relations of their society. Nonetheless this perception does not necessarily come bound up with sincerity, loyalty, and honour: Densher and the Prince come to understand that means do not engender greed, that the impulse exists with or without its satisfaction. Milly and Maggie triumph because they discover not only this aesthetic, intellectual validity apart from wealth but a grace of the human spirit that Charlotte and Kate lack as this impulse cannot, in James's fiction, coexist with greed.

James's novel devotes its full power simultaneously to sanctioning the institution of marriage as a convention and to challenging its given conventional status, exposing the flaw in the 'ghastly form,' demanding of the 'magnificent form' and of the partners in it the full redeeming intimacy of intense passion, a willed fidelity within the tightened bond, an authentic commitment to the communion it affords and to the larger community of purpose it can make possible. Terrors and cruelties are revealed within the form, easy convenience and profitable usage, the façade of decorum as well as the sustaining form of passion, the mere mask as well as the speaking form of love or the abysmal passion Maggie comes to know. The perilous mixture of weakness, convenience, utilitarian usage, a flawed harmony, and a community of devotion which the form affords is characteristic of the society in its larger dimensions which *The Golden Bowl* helps to mold, with the result that the 'the marriages' (as James intended to entitle the novel until recalling that he had already used that title) are at once part of the novel's subject and, like the bowl itself, a containing metaphor for its social vision. (Holland 350-1)

What Laurence Holland points out here, which is rarely articulated, is that James indeed had a social vision. A great many factors and themes inform his work: his father's philosophy, his brother's work in psychological theory, the idea of the decadence of Europe and the revitalised morality of America. Perhaps more than anything else he is concerned with the struggle for the perfect form, which was a constant, and very conscious, preoccupation. But even if James was only observing a small section of society, he was looking for the human truth that transcended fashion, and in this sense his cultural milieu is irrelevant.

Mattheissen reminds his readers of James's possible source for his title in Blake's poem, although the connection cannot be taken for granted.³² Ultimately the allusion only adds depth to a metaphor James made very strong by the presence of an actual golden bowl within the story, the wedding gift that connects the four main characters. His point is that love cannot be held in a golden bowl, metaphorical or otherwise. As he had already demonstrated in the story of Isabel Archer, no emotional relationship can survive when either or both partners cannot see beyond the physical or the aesthetic aspect of their lover, or their own emotion. Also, equating the social institution of marriage to the gilding of the flawed crystal (as Holland so eloquently said), any appearance so beautiful as that of the bowl is without worth if what lies beneath is so brittle and dysfunctional. James is not making an argument for free love: the relationship of greatest value in the novel is, after all, the marriage of Maggie and the Prince. In the metaphor of the crystal bowl, he insists that a strong relationship, a true marriage, needs neither deception nor social rituals to sanction it.

Viewed in the historical context of the suffragette movement and a rising awareness of the long-denied social and practical rights of women, the startling quality of what was to James necessary in the relation between the sexes is easily overshadowed. Much has been written about his fascination with Europe and his eventual British citizenship in terms of the art and culture he found so engrossing on the continent, but Martha Banta points out in her essay "Men, Women, and the American Way" (Freedman chapter 3) that James's leaving America had as much to do with his dissatisfaction with his homeland as with a fascination with the 'decadent'. In Europe, and particularly in Britain, he found that the relationship between the sexes in any intimate relationship had a greater opportunity of achieving intellectual equilibrium. He

³² "Can wisdom be kept in a silver rod / Or love in a golden bowl?" William Blake, quoted by Mattheissen, p. 83.

considered this a necessary aspect of life, and one that was actively discouraged in Teddy Roosevelt's chauvinistic United States. America as it was when he had reached maturity was not a place he found welcoming.

Although James did not plan *The Golden Bowl* to be his last novel, the work is accomplished in such a way to suggest that James may have had no further degree of achievement left to him. Maggie Verver, particularly in her relationship with Charlotte Stant, is an exceptional creation concluding a long list of fascinating female characters:

Charlotte's flaw, and for James this is a highly serious one, is a narrowness of vision. Like Kate, she is incapable of seeing a situation from another's viewpoint. Hence she fails to understand Maggie, to put herself into 'Maggie's skin', and she feels that both Maggie and her father are simple innocents. This inability to understand Maggie reveals Charlotte's own lack of awareness.... It is pointless to speculate that if we were permitted to see from Charlotte's standpoint, we would find a being whose field of vision was less limited, in the Jamesian sense. By placing his 'seeing' intelligence first in the Prince and ultimately in Maggie, James seems to be stressing that Maggie is the more fitting receptacle for his vision.... Maggie, unlike Charlotte, is capable of projecting herself into her step-mother's position. She has 'imagination'. It is because of this that she feels sympathy for Charlotte and ultimately triumphs with the Prince. Similar in this to Milly, she is capable of seeing round Charlotte intellectually, and her profundity and elasticity of vision arise precisely from her intense self-consciousness. In the Jamesian context, self recognition permits one truly to 'see' all others and thus to use one's compositional and transformative powers on them. (Appignanesi 71)

James provides Maggie Verver with opportunities that his earlier heroines did not have. She faces deceit, as Isabel Archer and Milly Theale did: she is not, on the other hand, the victim of an illicit relationship that occurred long before she could have interceded, as Isabel was, nor is she hampered by age or terminal illness as Lambert Strether and Milly Theale are. At the beginning of her story, her ignorance is not chosen or otherwise self-imposed, as it is with Isabel and Milly. Maggie's shortcomings with respect to perception are aspects of a sensibility that has been bred

into her as a desirable feature of a charming young woman, much as it was with Isabel's step-daughter Pansy, although Adam Verver is no Gilbert Osmond. The course of the novel demonstrates the growth of Maggie's identity, the emergence of a woman who has an intellectual, emotional, and sexual life outside of the role she plays in public as daughter and Princess. Her 'feminine' passivity makes her an ideal Victorian wife, and yet her lack of vitality and contented ignorance make her an object to be pitied or to be complacent about to the very people who should ostensibly value those very qualities in a wife.

Maggie grows from a cosseted, china-doll girl into a woman who, when confronted with the enormity of the deceit she has lived with, does not flee or resign herself to it. She instead takes control of the situation, and creates conditions where her individuality may truly win for her the reciprocation of the love she feels for her husband. She requires the absence of the woman who robbed her of the Prince's desire, but she also resigns her own claim on her father's presence to Charlotte's superior claim as his wife. Maggie suffers, but, once enlightened, does not submit to greed. Her simultaneous acknowledgement of the pressures and desires that produce adultery and her expression of a very real desire for her husband well beyond his role as Prince to her Princess, win for her a love deeper than Amerigo's physical passion for Charlotte.

CHAPTER VI THE INFLUENCE OF HENRY JAMES

In 1870, when James published *Watch and Ward*, the role promoted to women by the public was to maintain and develop their traditional habits of social and practical subservience because the masculine sphere of life depended upon the relief their 'gentleness' provided from a crude and arrogant daily life. Suggestions of equality and emancipation were greeted with a considerable amount of public hostility:

Feminist claims to intellectual equality with man and to the same education and professional opportunity were attacked by liberals—let alone conservatives; partly, no doubt, to forestall competition, but much more to prevent what they honestly believed would mean the irreparable loss of a vital moral influence. . . . Even a perfectly commonplace writer like Edwin Hood calls a chapter of *The Age and Its Architects* "Woman the Reformer" and begins by announcing: "The hope of society is in woman! The hope of the age is in woman! On her depends mainly the righting of wrongs, the correcting of sins, and the success of all missions," and goes on, therefore, to condemn the utterly mistaken tendency now growing up to encourage women to enter professional and political careers. All this is touched with melodramatic and sentimental exaggeration, but many intelligent women—George Eliot, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, Mrs. Lynn Linton, Beatrice Potter Webb, for example—viewed with uneasiness or apprehension any emancipation of their sex which would weaken its moral influence by distracting attention to the outside world or by coarsening the feminine nature itself (Houghton 352).

At the time of James's death in 1916, the passage of nearly half a century may not have achieved liberation, but the efforts of feminists had brought about a change in public opinion. The First World War changed Britain in ways no one could foresee: the labour crisis, among other things, made apparent the untapped resource that women represented to public life and to the economy. The decade after the end of the war,

1919 to 1928, saw the enfranchisement of women in both Britain and America, as well as the first women to sit in Britain's House of Commons.³³

The revolutionary quality of Henry James's views on and presentation of women was not shattering in the sense that it did not provoke storms of public opinion in the way that certain other books have been greeted. There was never any public appeal for any of his works to be burned or banned: neither did people throw themselves into the water to greet the ships that brought the instalments of his novels, as Dickens's American audience once did for him. James did not set out to illuminate society's prevalent hypocrisies in the manner of Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*. His object was not to actively redefine feminine identity as the Brontës did (whether they meant to or not), or to challenge popular conceptions of virtue and morality through his art as Thomas Hardy was doing in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. James observed and absorbed what was around him, but what was around him were not the conditions of life as Thackeray, Brontë, and Hardy saw it. He moved in the drawing room, gallery world where he met artists in a state that they had been elevated to by fame, if not born into already.

James's iconoclasm was subtle. Walter Houghton describes the social expectation of the Victorian woman, particularly in her role as wife, to be the agent and guardian of the "moral idealism so badly needed in an age of selfish greed and fierce competition" (Houghton 352). She was meant to relieve the strains of her husband's professional life, to be the wellspring of virtue and comfort that the daily life of the city suffocated. The idea of women's intellectual equality was held to be a threat to the achievement of this glorified role, and was thus denigrated and reviled by every conservative voice, whether through poetry, sermons, or popular 'guides to living,' that

³³ Sheila Rowbotham, *A Century of Women* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 115, pp.119-71.

could make itself heard.³⁴ James's heroines, particularly Isabel Archer, contradict this idea not by championing the 'New Woman,' but by evoking the synthesis of the polar opposites, the guardian of moral virtues who is in fact defeated by ignorance, by the inequality that is believed to be in her best interest.

James created novels and characters, acceptable to his contemporary audience, which did not embody the virtues that so much of the fiction of the time portrayed as paramount. He created feminine identities that were as graceful and charming as could be desired, and yet who were not frail. Isabel, Strether, Milly, and Maggie would, like anyone, prefer to be protected, or rather not to suffer. The exceptional quality in them is that when they are confronted with suffering, they do not flee or faint or go mad with the pain; they are strong enough to bear the trouble without resigning their identities to their oppressors.

Isabel Archer, Kate Croy, and Maggie Verver are in certain ways direct inversions of the popular heroine of the time. Wealth and/or marriage (at least, an understanding with the man who will eventually be a husband) is in most cases the ultimate goal of the heroine's story. James's women—Isabel in particular—are granted wealth and more than one choice of suitable husband early on, not for their social position or femininity but for their embodiment of atypical female graces: spontaneity, uncompromising intelligence, and independence. Kate, of course, shifts from heroine to villain in discovering that, having achieved a great love, great wealth is not going to follow, and subsistence is not sufficient for her; in the end, the rewards of her individuality are inadequate to withstand the temptation of materialism. Maggie Verver begins where Austen's heroines end, a girl of impeccable grace, sweetness, and filial devotion married to a real live Prince. Only, when the Prince turns out to be faithless,

³⁴ Walter Houghton, 'Love', in *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830 – 1870*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 341 – 393.

she does not fall back in despair and denounce him as a villain: she seeks to understand why she is inadequate to her husband's desire, and through a growth in her understanding, she overcomes her rival.

Ralph Touchett, Lambert Strether and Merton Densher stand as James's evaluation of courtship and marriage from the masculine point of view. While James's women are an argument for an advancement of intellect and individuality that was often repressed in their upbringing, James's men are an embodiment of his social ideal, the spiritual (not the publicly social) hybridization of the genders. The balancing of 'both sides of the story' is necessary to present a complete picture of a marriage or relationship. For a story to be told by only one partner, the other only a passive agent and interpreted only through what the protagonist is aware of, leaves a silence which in some circumstances could be used to reinterpret the meaning the author originally intended. There is nothing intrinsically wrong or damaging in this: Jean Rhys used it to great effect in her rendering of the untold story of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* as *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). However, the use of both (or, in some cases, all, where there are three or more individuals implicated in a love affair) voices presents a fuller reflection of society, allowing for a dialogue between what each partner expects of the relationship and of his or her lover.

James's impact was lasting. In America, the expansion of the country and its national identity, as well as the Depression, fuelled an exponential growth of literature. The concentration of serious literary talent in the states of New York and Massachusetts was diffused by the rise of talent from across the states, all the way to the Western coast. Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald were James's American heirs apparent, writing of the social order of the (sometimes fabulously) wealthy upper class in New England. Wharton, who had been such a close friend to James at the end of his life,

kept the presence of Isabel Archer alive in New York by naming the central character of *The Age of Innocence* (1920) Archer as well.

Other aspects of the female experience, particularly that relating to the Depression, were portrayed by Theodore Dreiser in novels such as *Sister Carrie* (1900), although Dreiser owed far more to the tradition of George Eliot as followed by Thomas Hardy than he did to James.³⁵ These authors, their contemporaries and successors, experienced social troubles far removed from James's disillusionment with Theodore Roosevelt's America—James lived long enough to see the beginning of the First World War, but death kept him from experiencing the full horror of the ensuing years.

Of the novelists who followed him in the world of British literature, he had lasting friendships with many: Ford Madox (Hueffer) Ford, Joseph Conrad, Hugh Walpole, and the young Virginia Woolf were all in varying degrees social acquaintances or close companions to the author secure in his venerable fame. F. M. Ford and John Galsworthy, in the respective examples *The Good Soldier* (1915) and *The Forsyte Saga* (1906 – 34) propelled James's novel of manners, adultery, and the decaying upper middle class into the Edwardian era, with considerable debt to his elaborate, polished style. Another of Ford's debts to James, one he shares with Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster, is that of the 'international novel', the relationship of Britain to its (in most cases, former) colonies having superseded that of the morally spontaneous American to decaying Europe. Even today this theme is present in such works as J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* (1984) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2001), worlds away from anything James would have imagined as fictional narratives.

³⁵ Walter Allen, *Tradition and Dream*. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1964), pp. xi – xxii, pp. 65-107.

George Eliot's influence as an illustrator of provincial society was taken up by James's contemporary Thomas Hardy: James's conception of human truth was limited in his fiction by his own materialism, and his understanding of literature was eventually crippled by it. James's love of high society and comfort was a factor in his difficulty in evaluating the work of his French contemporaries, although he was not completely blinded by it. However, when it came to Thomas Hardy, there was little love lost between the two writers. Hardy, as well as James's friends among the French naturalists, would be succeeded by writers such as D. H. Lawrence in carrying on a novelistic tradition of intense physical detail. In recent decades, following two World Wars and the achievement of women's and civil rights, this novelistic perspective has in many cases correlated and synthesised with that of psychological introspection.

Virginia Woolf, growing up in London as the young Virginia Stephen, knew Henry James as a prosperous and respected friend of her father's. When she came to publish her own work, both fiction and non-fiction, her style would be wildly different from his, but below the surface they have a lot in common. The first connection, one easily missed, is the interest they shared in the developments in art of their time. Collectors and art objects are ubiquitous in James's novels, and he wrote a number of essays about aesthetics. Virginia Woolf, aside from being actively involved in the art world through her sister Vanessa Bell and their circle of friends, developed a narrative style that correlates to the impressionist movement in painting.

Woolf was also, as is well known, very concerned with the nature of women. Her perspective is necessarily very different from his, and no doubt she could have found elements in his representations to criticise. In James's defence it must be said his disregard of the social experience of women in its material sense was not callous, as Dickens was capable of being in his observations of the degraded London poor.

Dickens knew something of being one of the underprivileged, which gives some of his caricatures an unpleasant taste of hypocrisy. James, on the other hand, never was a woman dealing with corsets, the strictures of public opinion, and the management of a family household. James urged intellectual and emotional recognition, and felt no more was necessary; Virginia Woolf watched the material injustices that the female intellect was subject to, and was not content with such concessions. She recognised the necessity of social change, and argued for it in a number of her essays. The most well-known of these, *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, are demanding, sometimes scathing arguments of the demand for intellectual rights in accordance with the recognition of women's ability.

Woolf's idea of the intellect and the nature of sexual relationships may owe more to her independent observations than a conscious absorption of James's ideas, but her representations constitute a direct progression from his. The thoughts of the middle aged Clarissa interlaced with her memories of a summer spent with two idealistic and politically dissenting friends, Peter Walsh and Sally Seton, associate Clarissa's choice of the status quo with her social discomfort and an alluded to emotional break-down. Flash-backs to their youth tell the story of Clarissa's choice of Richard Dalloway, who believed "no decent man ought to read Shakespeare's sonnets because it was like listening at keyholes" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 115), over the less socially successful but far more vivid Peter. The older Peter, involved in a relationship with a younger married woman, thinks back to his time with Clarissa, to how they "went in and out of each other's minds without any effort", and feels Clarissa must think him a failure; while their reunion, for her, signifies what she lost, so strongly that she questions why she didn't marry him in the first place. Their friend Sally advocated Peter's suit, valuing him above "the Hughs and Dalloways and all the other 'perfect gentlemen' who would

'stifle her soul'; thirty years later, that is exactly what Clarissa feels, having in the interim lost her intimacy with both Peter and Sally (for whom she feels as intensely as she does for any man).

The relationship between Peter and Clarissa in the novel, and the number of times they unconsciously echo one another's thoughts, re-interpret James's connection between Isabel Archer and Ralph Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Clarissa, Dalloway, and Peter are a very different triangle to Isabel, Osmond, and Ralph, but there is a distinct resonance of Osmond's world of surface and façade in Clarissa's life as Peter sees it: "the inlaid table, the mounted paper-knife, the dolphin and the candlesticks, the chair-covers and the old valuable English tinted prints" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 67). Woolf repeats the phrase "the death of the soul" several times in the novel, through various characters: this death is the product of being put through "the mill of the conventional" that Ralph so hated to see Isabel ground in (*Portrait of a Lady* 478).

Virginia Woolf also often developed and advanced upon James's notion of women being the emotional complement to men. In terms of her fiction, *Orlando* (1928) represents Woolf's conception of the mind as being without gender: Orlando, by spontaneous (inexplicable) transformation of man into woman, is the ultimate expression of gender identities as social impositions. One cannot imagine James approving of the physical details of the story, but Woolf's character is a simple distillation of James's own views as expressed most succinctly in his review of Mathilde de Serao (see above, pg. 48).

Woolf's friend E. M. Forster was also preoccupied with the place of spiritual union in marriage. Several of his novels—*Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *A Room With A View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), and *A Passage to India* (1924)—continued to examine the experience of courtship and married life in a new era, and the

constrictions that were still placed by society on the individual understanding and achievement of love and moral integrity. E. M. Forster, like D. H. Lawrence, challenged the class system that deadened emotional and intellectual vitality: in *Howards End*, Helen Shlegel defies the wealthy, conservative family her sister Margaret has married into by falling in love with and bearing an illegitimate child to the bank clerk Leonard Bast. Helen endures a considerable amount of emotional pain, not the least her lover's death at the hands of her sister's stepson, but she echoes James's Kate Croy, without Kate's inherent material greed, as James's Isabel Archer echoed Eliot's greedier Gwendolen Harleth.

Lucy Honeychurch of *A Room With a View* owes a debt to James's Isabel as well. The story isn't a tragic one, Lucy lacking Isabel's taste for grand gestures, as well as falling in love with a man far more physically compelling for her than any man seems to be for Isabel. She is also free of much (but not all) of the tension that money creates in James's novel. Nonetheless their dilemmas bear a distinct resemblance to one another: Lucy is courted by, and halfway through her story decides to marry a young man named Cecil Vyse. His name implies both sin and torture, for all that he's more ridiculous than oppressive: he is respectable, financially secure enough not to have a profession, he has a fondness for bad jokes, and he has excellent (though not impeccable) taste in culture and art. But, while in Italy, Lucy meets George Emerson (a personification of the philosopher's ideas) and can neither explain nor ignore her fascination with him. When—through her fiancé's agency, though he is ignorant of their acquaintance—George moves to Lucy's neighbourhood, their renewed association forces Lucy to question her relationship with Cecil. His view of her consists entirely of her taste in music, her resemblance to a Leonardo da Vinci painting, and how far she (and their relationship) conform to Patmore-ish concept of what a couple ought to be

like. Vyse, as well as his mother, explicitly define Lucy and her nature as an object for social display, as Osmond does Isabel: he is saved from Osmond's repellent nature by being utterly ignorant that there is any other way to think, although he can hardly be said to be charming. George Emerson, on the other hand, is as articulate in exhorting Lucy not to be trapped by convention as Vyse is in maintaining it:

[Vyse] is the sort who are all right so long as they keep to things—books, pictures—but kill when it comes to people.... It's shocking enough to lose you in any case, but generally a man must deny himself joy, and I would have held back if your Cecil had been a different person.... But I saw him first in the National Gallery, when he winced because my father mispronounced the names of great painters. Then he brings us back here, and we find it is to play some silly trick on a kind neighbour. That is the man all over—playing tricks on people, on the most sacred form of life that he can find. Next, I meet you together, and find him protecting and teaching you and your mother to be shocked, when it was for you to settle whether you were shocked or no.... He daren't let a woman decide. He's the type who's kept Europe back for a thousand years. Every moment of his life he's forming you, telling you what's charming or amusing or ladylike, telling you what a man thinks womanly; and you, you of all women, listen to his voice instead of to your own.... Therefore—not 'therefore I kissed you,' because the book made me do that, and I wish to goodness I had more self-control. I'm not ashamed. I don't apologise. But it has frightened you, and you may not have noticed that I love you. Or would you have told me to go, and dealt with a tremendous thing so lightly?....I'm the same kind of brute at bottom. This desire to govern a woman—it lies very deep, and men and women must fight it together before they shall enter the garden. But I do love you—surely in a better way than he does....I want you to have your own thoughts even when I hold you in my arms." (*A Room With a View* 203 – 5)

George Emerson and his love for Lucy are a direct indictment of the Victorian conception of womanhood that James in his subtle way contradicted through Isabel Archer and so many of his characters. Forster takes more freedom in saying, and perhaps is more aware of, the distance between what a person feels by nature and what expectations have been bred by society, even when George Emerson states that he cannot pinpoint the root of man's desire to dominate. George's pleas to Lucy and their

happy ending represent another milestone in the progression between women as the silent partner in marriage and an understanding of equality. He is positively desperate that she understand how necessary her will and intelligence are to his love for her, rather than such aspects of her personality being potential stumbling blocks to the place he feels she ought to occupy by his side. George also recalls Eliot's Will Ladislav in his vitality and outspoken nature, and Lucy's final happiness is a vindication of the silence Dorothea disappeared into when she married the man her family felt she shouldn't.

Forster also took another step towards social freedom, of admirable magnitude (and courage) considering the era he wrote in, in *Maurice*. The story of an illicit homosexual love affair was unpublishable when it was written, homosexuality at the time being a prosecutable offence; it appeared after Forster's death, in 1971. It is admirable enough that Forster verbalised this aspect of life, for all that it could not be publicised: the relationship of the novel achieves what James could not bring himself to (in more ways than one). The question of the role of the woman, her intellectual and emotional equality, is necessarily laid aside, but the novel effectively demonstrates the sexual and emotional fulfilment that may be found without regard to class, education (which is not synonymous with intellect), or gender. James was not solely responsible for this turning point in the world of fiction, but it would have taken longer without him.